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We GUARANTEE to REDUCE your WAIST THREE INCHES IN TEN DAYS . . .

. . . . or it won't cost you one cent . . . . even the postage will be refunded!

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GUN SLINGIN'

CHAPTER I

A Toast to Murder

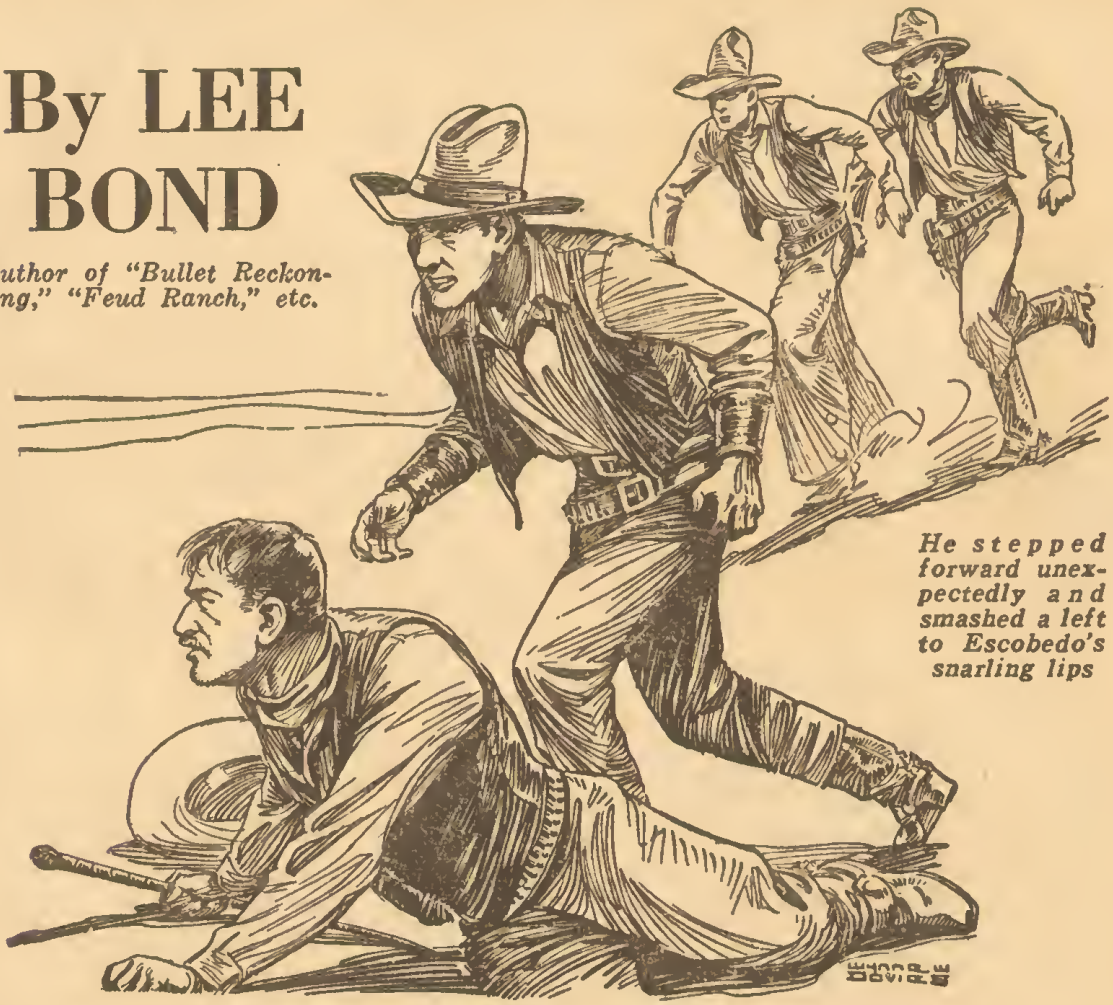
BEFORE the grave of old Ben Donahue was completely filled in by the two men who wielded the rusty shovels, Poke Jordan was leaving the orchard. Poke Jordan had swung his tawny eyes over the huge crowd of neighbors and friends who had come to see Ben Donahue put to rest there on the vast Flying W ranch he had built.

But Poke Jordan was not thinking of those things as he glanced about the crowd. He had caught the eyes of certain Flying W men there in the crowd. Poke Jordan signaled those men to follow, then turned and left the orchard, stalking towards the great, rambling ranch-

Ready for Action with His Holsters Greased!

By LEE BOND

Author of "Bullet Reckoning," "Feud Ranch," etc.



He stepped forward unexpectedly and smashed a left to Escobedo's snarling lips

MAVERICK

A Complete NOVEL

house that sat on a little knoll overlooking a vast sweep of valley.

Poke Jordan cursed chokingly as he shambled along at a loose, gawky gait. But it was not grief over the death of his foster father, old Ben Donahue, that choked Pope Jordan's voice. It was greed that made Jordan's long, crooked-jawed face twitch and his voice thick. Those men who had caught Jordan's signal heard his swearing, and slowed down, reluctant to overtake him. But at the corner of the mighty ranchhouse he stopped, turned about, and stood waiting while the three men he had signaled from the crowd came up to him.

"Well, it happened, Buck," Poke Jordan's voice shook a little as he talked. "Me, I've rodded this spread five years. Made it pay, too. An'

Hombres, a Wranglin' Kid Proves His Worth!

Jim Donahue

now that damned Jim Donahue will come back—be equal owner with me."

The man addressed as Buck was a squat fellow, with coarse, battered features and black eyes that glowed strangely at the mention of Jim Donahue's name.

"Yuh—yuh shore, Poke?" Buck grunted. "Yuh shore the ol' man give half the spread to that lousy nevvy o' his that he run off the place five year ago?"

"Of course I'm shore!" Poke Jordan rasped through locked teeth. "Damn it, I rode into Sage yesterday an' had a talk with Lawyer Pryor. The law-sharp told me, boys, that Jim Donahue will own half this Flyin' W spread—as long as he lives."

Jordan put so much stress on those last few words that the three men before him stiffened, their eyes silently questioning. For the first time in many hours Poke Jordan grinned his tight-lipped grin, and there were smoldering lights deep in his tawny eyes.

Buck Martin, the *hombre* with the murderous black eyes, nodded his bristly black head slowly, a faint, knowing grin on his thick lips.

On Buck Martin's right stood Felix Escobedo, a lithe Mexican who hummed softly through teeth that showed in a fixed, mirthless grin. Felix Escobedo's lean right hand tapped the pearl-gripped six-gun that was holstered low on his right thigh.

The third Flying W cowboy laughed harshly, and let his own calloused hands slide to twin gun butts as if he, too, understood the situation perfectly. That third man was Dick Prout, a gangly, red-muzzled fellow who rode the Flying W rough string—a bronc buster.

"Only trouble is, Poke, it may take us a long time to locate that Jim Donahue," Dick Prout drawled. "After yuh framed that hoss stealin' onto him five years ago an' got him kicked off the place nobody has heard from him, have they?"

"Think I'm that big a fool?" Poke Jordan grinned crookedly. "I've kept tabs on Jim Donahue, fearin' that some day this very thing might happen. Blood's a sight thicker than water, an' I figgered that the ol' man might weaken one o' these days an' want to take that snivelin' nevvy o' his back."

"YOU know where the *muchacho ees*, then?" Escobedo purred. "You theenk, *Senor* Buck, *Senor* Deek an' me, we should go pay heem the visit, no?"

"Jim Donahue is down yonder on the Border, workin' for Pink Miller, bossin' one o' Miller's ranches," Poke Jordan snarled. "But you three won't have to go after him. Lawyer Pryor wrote Jim Donahue a letter. An' Donahue's due here tomorrow mornin' some time."

"Yeah?" Buck Martin grinned widely now. "I've missed the pleasure o' battin' Donahue around since he left. When he shows up here—"

He must not show up here," Poke Jordan cut in harshly. "Listen, boys. String yore bets with me an' yuh'll be took care of right. Ain't we already made plenty o' *dinero* on the side, even when that whinin' ol' buzzard of a Ben Donahue was alive?"

"Shore, Poke!" Dick Prout spoke up heartily. "Yuh've played it straight with us three boys. We know yuh'll do to ride the river with, feller, so tell us what yuh want done."

The other two nodded agreement, and the ugly face of Poke Jordan split into a wide grin. "Fork yore broncs an' head for Buzzard Pass," he clipped. "That Jim Donahue will come up from the south—up through Buzzard Pass. An' if yuh three was to be hid there in them big boulders I reckon Jim Donahue might have a sort of accident happen to him—a *fatal* one."

"I get yuh, Poke," Buck Martin leered. "Jim Donahue rides into some hot lead an' dies sudden. But ain't yuh comin' along tuh enjoy the fun? If I remember, yuh shore hate that kid."

"I've got to be with plenty o' witnesses from now until somebody finds Jim Donahue's carcass," Poke Jordan said. "If I couldn't prove a plumb solid alibi, there might be trouble."

"But why we go now?" Felix Escobedo asked. "Tonight, she weel be cold in those Buzzard Pass. Ef we go early tomorrow—"

"Can't take a chance on him gettin' through, boys," Poke Jordan growled. "By goin' now, yuh'll be in Buzzard Pass a little before sundown. An' if Jim Donahue got that letter an' started right off, he could hit the pass some time tonight."

"Poke's right, boys," Dick Prout grunted. "If that kid got a good fast hoss under him an' knowed how to ride the critter without killin' it too quick he could hit Buzzard Pass some time tonight."

Poke Jordan

"Yeah, an' that's about what'll happen," Poke Jordan gritted. "You fellers better take turns standin' guard all night, so— Here comes the mourners, boys. Drift casual-like, but get goin' soon as you can. Me, I've got to pull a long face an' spend the rest o' the afternoon tellin' these neighbors of ours how plumb tore up I am."

THE crowd was coming from the orchard where old Ben Donahue had been put to rest. Ranchers, cowboys, prospectors and a sprinkling of dry farmers, they filed slowly towards the great ranchhouse and mounted the wide porch where Poke Jordan sat trying his best to look grieved. The men and women milled uneasily about, trying in their rough way to comfort the man they thought needed it.

"Ben was a fine man, Poke," a grizzled old ranchman said stiffly. "He settled this country when it meant fightin' Apaches as well as them devils that come up acrost the Line to raid this country that they

Felix Escobedo

still called theirs. This territory lost a mighty fine and straight-shootin' man when ol' Ben Donahue cashed in his chips, Poke."

"He—he was awful fine," Poke said, trying desperately to keep a sneer out of his gritty voice. "Why, he taken me in when I was only a button an'—an' raised me like I was his own. Too bad his nevvy, the only livin' kid he had, went hoss thief. I think that helped kill pore ol' Ben if yuh ask me."

"Likely it did," a man spoke up from the crowd. "But Jim Donahue was allus a right smart seemin' lad. Wonder whatever made him steal them hosses from his Uncle Ben an' sell 'em acrost the Line down yonder?"

"What makes any gent turn thief?" another man demanded. "Money, that's what. Jim Donahue was only fifteen or so, but he had spent his life runnin' around the country with his daddy, tradin' hosses an' the like. The kid had a bad start."

"Just the same, that didn't excuse him for stealin' from his uncle," Poke Jordan growled. "When Jim's daddy died, ol' Ben taken the kid in an' tried to do right by him."

There was other such talk, then the people who had come to see their old friend laid in his last resting place filed down into the yard and out to where buckboards, buggies, wagons and saddled horses stood tied to the boles of a grove of cottonwood trees. A few moments later the mourners were driving or riding away, and Poke Jordan watched them with sneering contempt.

"Fools!" he mused. "Within five years I'll bust ever mother's son of yuh, send yuh down the road talkin' to yourselves. With that whinin' ol' Ben Donahue out of the way at last, I can run this country like it ought to be run."

Poke Jordan got to his feet, slogged across the porch, and entered the house. A few moments later he sat at Ben Donahue's battered old desk in the little office room, a glass of whiskey in one hand, a hard, gloating grin on his ugly face.

"I seen Felix, Dick an' Buck head west, towards Buzzard Pass," he chuckled. "So, here's to your home comin', Jim Donahue. Here's to the lead that'll chaw yore guts when yuh hit Buzzard Pass. And with a wicked grin on his thin lips, Poke Jordan drank his toast to murder.

CHAPTER II

"Head For a Cell!"

MARTIN, Felix Escobedo and Dick Prout were drunk by the time they reached Buzzard Pass. They had come through the little town of Sage to buy supplies, for they expected to spend the night and perhaps part of the following day in Buzzard Pass.

But a close tally of the supplies they had bought would have shown

more liquor than grub. They had already opened the second quart, and were singing ribald songs and joshing about the murder they meant to do. Meanwhile, their horses plodded up the winding trail that led to the high pass in the barren mountain range that separated the hills country from the harsh, waterless badlands beyond.

That second quart of whiskey was almost gone when the trio of killers finally dismounted in the pass, hid their horses in a pocket among a field of up-slanted granite boulders, and prepared to make camp.

"Go take a look down the south side, Felix, just for luck," Buck Martin ordered. "Yuh won't see nothin' but desert, I reckon. But we ain't takin' chances. With Jim Donahue turned into buzzard meat, Poke Jordan an' us three will be settin' purty. Go take a look, Felix, while Dick an' me fix camp."

The Mexican grinned crookedly, helped himself to a drink from the open bottle, then jingled his spurs down the pass, singing a ribald song as he walked. But the song died suddenly in Felix Escobedo's lean throat when he looked out and down upon the panoramic spread of desert that lay below him.

The drunken grin left his lean, pock-marked face, and a sizzling oath rasped from his twisting lips as he wheeled and ran back to where his gringo companions were fixing camp.

"He comes now!" Felix cried breathlessly. "Those *muchacho* ees close, almost to the top."

The others dropped what they were doing and began grabbing for Winchesters that were still in their saddle scabbards.

"Mebbe some traveler," Dick Prout muttered as he made sure his gun was loaded. "Hell, boys, this'd be too much luck, gettin' our job over with so quick."

Emery Kirk

"Nobody would be usin' this trail but Jim Donahue," Buck Martin growled. "They ain't a ranch or nothin' over this way, so if there's a rider comin' it's that damned kid."

The three of them rushed back to the pass as soon as Felix had got his own Winchester. They crouched behind boulders, watching the tedious progress of a rider below them. The man was close as distances go, but it would be some time before his laboring horse came up into the pass.

The murderous trio cursed bitterly as they realized this, for they saw that the sun was already setting. Light would remain here on the high mountains after the lowlands were in darkness, however, and the three killers settled themselves to wait.

Buck Martin produced a fresh bottle from inside his shirt, pried the cork out with a knife blade, and drank deeply. The bottle went the rounds twice before the killers began grinning again as they had grinned before Felix discovered that rider coming up the trail.

"Gettin' dusk down yonder in the low country," Buck Martin grunted;

"an' when that son comes around that white boulder down yonder he'll be in range. We'll let him have it, boys, when he comes around that white rock."

"We better wait until he comes closer, Buck," Dick Prout frowned. "I don't like to shoot at a gent until I know he's the one I'm after."

"That gent comin' yonder will be Jim Donahue," Buck Martin grunted. "Strangers that come up from the Border stick to the stage road. When Jim Donahue gets this side of yonder white rock— There he is. Let him have it."

A tall rider on a lathered brown horse had just ridden past the big white boulder. Three Winchesters steadied against boulder edges, and three trigger fingers clamped down almost at the same moment. The reverberating beat of the triple explosion rattled hollowly through the pass, echoing and re-echoing until the sound became a tiny whisper.

The rider on the lathered horse crashed backward, hands windmilling as he fell. He lay there in the trail now, a dark huddle against the white boulder. The three Winchesters spoke again, and that dark huddle twitched a little.

BUCK MARTIN and his two companions were running back through the pass, sobered a little by what they had done. They mounted and went spurring back down the trail, their singing forgotten as they fled under that nameless fear that goads the cold-blooded murderer.

As that murderous trio fled, the somber eyes of a lean-hipped, broad-shouldered young man watched them go. That somber-eyed youth's sun-bronzed face was pale and drawn. Over his rough range clothing lay a thick coat of alkali dust. But there was no dust or any other evidence of lack of care to be seen on the twin .45s that the lean youth slid back into the two low-slung holsters that had their tips thonged to his lean thighs.

That lean young cowboy with the somber black eyes who watched the three Flying W murderers flee was Jim Donahue.

He was crouched in on a narrow ledge, high above the trail that cut through the pass. Jim Donahue had ridden into the south end of the pass just as the three Flying W men came into the north end. He had heard them singing their songs, and had taken to the rocks through a narrow cut, not knowing just what to expect.

That man who lay dead back down the south slope was an officer of some sort; that Jim Donahue knew. Jim had been galloping towards the high pass two hours earlier, when his keen eyes had caught sight of a man turning quickly from the trail ahead of him.

Knowing from the man's actions that he was up to some trick, Jim Donahue had quit the trail, skirted wide of the spot where the unknown rider had turned into a mesquite thicket, and made a run for the pass. His great sorrel stallion had carried him past the ambush, but the fellow had sensed what was happening and given chase.

Through a pair of powerful glasses that he always carried in a pouch behind his saddle cantle, Jim Donahue had seen that his pursuer was wearing some law emblem on his flapping vest as he spurred in the stallion's wake. Jim Donahue had wondered, but that was all. So far as he knew the law had no reason to be chasing him. But with the knowledge that he had some mighty important business to attend to in Sage, he had kept ahead of the officer, knowing that he could find out what the man wanted when they got into Sage.

So Jim Donahue had come into

Buck Martin rocked back, lost his balance

Buzzard Pass—and almost into a death trap. The fact that an officer rode his back trail made him wonder when he heard men coming into the pass from the north. Fearing a trap, Jim Donahue had cut up that water trough, left his stallion hidden in a brushy pocket, and clambered up to the ledge above the pass.

But before he got up there he heard rifles rattling briefly, then the pound of shod hoofs in the pass. He watched three men fleeing now.

"If that thick-set cuss on the pinto ain't Buck Martin, I'm a sheep herder," Jim growled. "An' the gent in the yellow shirt shore looks a heap like Dick Prout, Uncle Ben's bronc stomper. Other one's a Mexican, judgin' from his *sombrero* an' fancy clothes. Ain't been up in these parts long, or he'd get rid of his Mexican outfit in this brush country."

Jim Donahue was working back along the ledge as he muttered those things. He stopped suddenly, for he had made a sharp turn around a

rock spire and could look back down the south slope. He saw a riderless horse down there, and a huddled figure at the base of a big white boulder.

A low grunt came from Jim Donahue's lips as he leaped down to a lower ledge, then swung around another spire, and skidded down a sharply slanted boulder to the head of a brush-choken draw. His stallion whinnied softly as he approached, silky coat still dripping sweat from the hard race up to the pass.

"Looks like hell has done busted loose, Drifter," Jim Donahue growled to his horse as he swung into the saddle. "I expected trouble from Poke Jordan an' them sons he calls cowboys. But what they wanted to drill that officer for is more than I kin see."

Jim came out into the pass, glanced uneasily towards the south, and finally rode back that way. He went down to the white rock, dismounted, and rolled the limp, huddled form over easily.

The light was failing fast now, and the long shadows were stealing softly up the scarred sides of the mountains.

However, there remained still light enough for Jim Donahue to see the leathery face and grizzled hair of the murdered man.

There was a big deputy sheriff's badge pinned to the dead man's vest. Jim Donahue shuddered a little as he looked, for the whole chest and neck of the man was soggy with blood.

"Nothin' I kin do for yuh now, fella, so I'll drift," Jim Donahue said softly. "But your boss will hear about this. Mebbe yuh knew somethin' on Buck Martin an' Dick Prout."

Jim mounted then, rode to the dead man's horse, and looped up the animal's trailing reins. He sent the horse on ahead of him, through the pass and down the opposite side.

A LITTLE over two hours later Jim Donahue came riding into Sage, noticing with no particular interest that the squalid little huddle of adobe buildings was no different looking than it had been five years ago.

His wide, hard lips quirked sardonically as he headed into a hitch rack before a scaly little adobe that had a row of tiny, heavily barred windows down each side.

Jim wondered idly if big, booze-soaked Emery Kirk would still be the sheriff. He nodded slightly as he stepped forward, for he saw that Emery Kirk was indeed still the sheriff.

The big, flabby-bodied officer sat slumped behind his desk that was in one corner of the little space he reserved as an office. The sheriff looked up sleepily as Jim Donahue stepped through the door, blinked his watery blue eyes, and lifted one ponderous hand to paw a lock of straw-colored hair from his wide forehead.

"Howdy, Em," Jim Donahue called with no particular welcome in his voice. "Is that a low-turned lamp glowin' or is it your nose?"

"Huh?" came the sheriff's heavy voice through the gloom. "Who are yuh an' what you want? I'm busy."

"Doin' what?" Jim Donahue asked, and there was a snap to his voice that brought the ponderous sheriff up with a strangled oath.

The sheriff searched himself for a match, found one at last, and lit a lamp that hung on the wall behind his desk. He turned slowly, a little unsteady from an afternoon's drinking. He blinked his bloodshot little eyes, then stiffened slowly, loose, flabby lips stretching into a crooked grin.

"Well, well!" The sheriff's voice

was hoarse, sneering, as he looked Jim Donahue up and down insolently. "So the local hoss thief has growed up, has he? I—"

"Kirk, I'll cram a fist down yore gullet if yuh don't watch out," Jim Donahue rasped. "You an' some others are gonna think twice afore yuh call me hoss thief after I've straightened out a few things around here. But right now—"

"Sa-aa-y!" The sheriff snarled, heaving his vast bulk around the old desk to stand before Jim. "Yuh go poppin' off to me like that, younker, an' I'll lam the stuffin's outa yuh. I'll— Say, where's Ralph, an' why didn't he take your guns?"

Jim Donahue tensed, somber eyes puckering. "Who's Ralph?" he countered. "An' what makes you think anybody was supposed to take my guns?"

"Ralph Vail, my deputy," the big sheriff growled, eyeing the twin six-guns at Jim Donahue's thighs uneasily. "I—I sent Ralph out to watch fer you. I aim to keep the peace around here, Jim Donahue."

"Are you loco drunk, or what?" Jim snapped. "What business would you have sendin' a deputy after me, you over-fed booze-soaked fool?"

The sheriff's pale little eyes were rolling with anger, and a slow flush had spread over his beefy face. But Jim Donahue was not noticing the sheriff particularly close just then. His mind was shuttling back to what had happened in Buzzard Pass.

"I sent my deputy out after you so's I could see you first thing an' have a talk with yuh." The sheriff's voice was thunderous now. "But yuh're here, so—"

"An' yore deputy is dead up yonder on the south slope of Buzzard Pass," Jim Donahue cut in quietly. "He was murdered, Em, by— What the—"

The huge sheriff had moved with a speed that few would have guessed a man of his bulk possessed. His ponderous right fist held a cocked .45 now, and the muzzle of the Colt bored stiffly into Jim Donahue's lean middle.

"Poke Jordan warned me that yuh'd likely come back here an' make trouble," the sheriff thundered. "So Deputy Ralph Vail is dead, is he? Head for one of them cells back yonder, hoss thief!"

CHAPTER III

A Murderer Plans

POKE JORDAN strangled on the whiskey he was just pouring down his long neck when the doors of Cowboy's Palace slapped shut behind Buck Martin, Felix Escobedo and Dick Prout. Jordan coughed loudly, swiped the back of a bony hand across his lips, and went up the long barroom in his loose-jointed stride.

"What the blazes?" he snarled harshly at the grinning trio. "Yuh three are drunk. I sent yuh out to do a job, an' here you are hangin' around town drunk."

"Keep yore shirt tucked in, Poke," Buck Martin chuckled hoarsely. "Jim Donahue had a bad accident—"

"Yuh—yuh mean that—"

Buck Martin did not give Poke Jordan time to finish. Martin interrupted, and with a sneering grin on his thick lips told what had happened at Buzzard Pass.

"We let the son get close, then poured the lead to him," Buck Martin finished. "I reckon, Poke, the drinks is on you."

"An' all yuh want!" Poke Jordan was grinning now, tawny eyes fairly shining. "It's a good thing I sent yuh three on up there. Step up, boys, an' oil your gullets. But remember now, to watch yore talk."

Poke Jordan led his already tipsy

killers towards the bar that ran down one side of the room. "Me, I've been right in here all evenin', where plenty of men have seen me. Looks like smooth sleddin' for us four now, don't it?"

"Shore, it's a gold mine we've got, Poke," Buck Martin growled. "But we better not let the rest of the Flyin' W boys in on the deal, had we?"

"No!" Poke Jordan growled. "Yuh three is swell pardners, an' all I need tuh run this country like it needs to be run. Them other eight men that draws Flyin' W pay won't know a thing. Let 'em punch cattle for thirty per if they want to. Us four will be gettin' rich while they do it."

"Those reeches, they come soon, no?" Felix Escobedo purred. "Me, I have the *senorita* in Sonora who have the eyes of the angel, the lips of honey, the heart of fire an'—"

"An' a dagger ready to slice yore belly open if she hears about that *senorita* yuh've been singin' them sick-calf songs to here in Sage," Dick Prout cut in roughly. "Better shy off from the gals, Felix."

"Bah!" Felix sneered. "Always, my red-headed one, you make fon of the love. Some day—"

"Some day," Poke Jordan growled, "yuh'll wish yuh hadn't been so handy at singin' fool songs to female women, Felix. Forget the gals, boys, an' drink up. Here's to—"

POKE JORDAN never finished the toast. The saloon doors slapped open once more, and into the room charged Sheriff Emery Kirk, his huge frame heaving down the floor like a ridiculously soft rubber ball. The sheriff's pale eyes were protruding, his flabby lips were open, and his face was the color of lard.

"Somethin' wrong!" Poke Jordan hissed, setting his untouched drink down hastily. "If you three have bungled that job—"

The sheriff came steaming up, and the men farther along the bar hushed their talk to mosey forward. Other men came from the gambling layouts at the back of the room, and Poke Jordan cursed under his breath.

Something was mighty wrong, Poke knew, otherwise this drink-guzzled sheriff would never show so much animation. And deep within his miserable heart, Poke Jordan felt sure that whatever was wrong had something to do with Jim Donahue and Buzzard Pass.

"I—I want a posse, quick!" the sheriff bawled when he had caught his breath.

He grabbed for a bottle that was near Dick Prout's elbow, tilted it, and drank thirstily while the crowd before him stared in wonder. The sheriff set the bottle down, dragged a hand across his puffy lips, and blinked at the silent men who stood watching him.

"I said I wanted a posse!" he thundered. "Jim Donahue killed Deputy Ralph Vail up yonder in Buzzard Pass. Get hosses— Ow!"

The sheriff's voice ended in a yowl of pain. He had started the bottle up to his lips once more. But Poke Jordan leaped forward, buried steely fingers in the sheriff's flabby forearm and squeezed down until the bottle hit the rail before the bar and broke with a brittle tinkle.

"What yuh talkin' about?" Poke Jordan gritted savagely. "Keep yore nose out of a bottle long enough to tell us what's happened."

"I—I dunno fer shore what took place," the sheriff snarled, yanking loose from Jordan. "Jim Donahue come ridin' in an'—an' practically admitted that—that— Well, it must have been him kilt my deputy, anyhow."

Poke Jordan was white to the lips and trembling like a green horse under its first rider. And, like a

green horse, Poke Jordan was ready to explode into dynamic action.

His tawny eyes, thinned to hot crescents beneath his brows, shuttled swiftly to his three hirelings, who stood agape. Poke Jordan's flattened nose flared white at the nostrils, and there was a sort of humming groan in his throat that struck fear to the hearts of his three hirelings.

Those three knew, just as Poke Jordan knew, that the deputy sheriff had been killed instead of Jim Donahue.

"I told yuh—" Dick Prout croaked suddenly.

Buck Martin's knotty right fist described a short arc. That fist traveled only a few inches, yet Dick Prout fell as if shot when the fist cracked against his crooked jaw.

"Keep yore lip shut, Dick!" Buck Martin's voice held more pleading than anger as he looked down at the dazed bronc rider. "That fool bet yuh an' me made ain't important at a time like this."

"What's goin' on?" Sheriff Kirk roared. "Martin, why did you wallop Prout? An' what was he about to say?"

"Aw, Dick was aimin' to rub it in a little, I reckon." Buck Martin's face was a sickly color, yet he forced something that looked like a grin to his lips. "Dick Prout bet me a month's pay that Jim Donahue would start trouble within twenty-four hours after he got back to this country. I called the bet, an' I reckon Dick was ready to rub it in some, for it looks like that Donahue younker shore started somethin'."

Dick Prout got slowly to his feet, forced a grin to his lips, and looked with troubled eyes at the sheriff.

"I—I made a mistake, Sheriff," he gulped. "Buck's right. A fool bet ain't important at a time like this. Yuh—yuh say Jim Donahue come in an' give himself up?"

"He—he come in an' I slung him in jail," the big sheriff growled. "But what I want now is a bunch tuh go with me an' help pack pore Ralph's carcass in. When I get back I'll make Jim Donahue sign a confession if I have to blister his feet with a hot iron."

VOICES lifted now as men surged forward to volunteer their services. Poke Jordan and his three trusted hirelings moved with the general press of humanity towards the wide front doors. But as the throng filed out, Poke Jordan and his men fell out of line and moved swiftly away along the fronts of the scaly buildings.

Not until they were well away from the milling crowd that was huddled before the Cowboy's Palace did Poke Jordan call a halt. He whirled on his three men, bony hands trembling above gun grips.

"Yuh whey-brained and spraddle-legged idiots have shore played hell!" Jordan snarled. "How did it happen? Don't stand there like so many warts on a log. Talk! How come yuh to kill that deputy?"

"We thought he was Jim Donahue, Poke," Buck Martin gulped. "Yuh might have made the same mistake. It was about dusk, an' the light wasn't so good, that depity come ridin' up the trail, an' we let him have it, thinkin', of course, that we was doin' Jim Donahue in."

"I told Buck we ought to wait ontil that jasper got closer," Dick Prout growled. "But he was plumb certain that the gent comin' up the trail would be nobody else but Jim Donahue, so—"

"So shut yore trap!" Poke Jordan cut in savagely. "If Buck hadn't batted yuh down in the saloon there a while ago, yuh would have said enough to hang us all. What's got inter yuh fellas. If yuh're gonna start pullin' such

boners as this you'll make noosebait out of us."

"Poke, I dunno what tuh say about this mess," Buck Martin's voice sounded strained, nervous. "But mebbe things ain't so bad, at that. If we work it right that Jim Donahue can be took care of an' made tuh shoulder the blame fer that depity's death at the same time."

"Such as how?" Poke Jordan sneered. "If yuh've got an idea you better be careful. It might slip through yore skull an' hatch plumb out before yuh could tell it."

Buck flushed, and there was a gleam in his eyes that meant rising anger. But at the moment he was too interested in a bunch of new ideas to give way to his temper.

"The sheriff an' a big posse will be foggin' out to Buzzard Pass after that depity's carcass," Buck Martin grunted his words. "Yuh take Dick an' Felix, Poke, an' go with the posse."

"What are yuh gettin' at?" Poke Jordan snarled. "If yuh think you kin skin out when things look bad—"

"Watch that tongue o' yores, Poke," Buck Martin snarled as he stepped slightly forward. "I ain't aimin' to skin out fer no reason—yuh included. But if yuh'll do what I say I'll stay here in town, plant a Winchester on Jim Donahue's saddle that has been fired, then sneak around tuh the jail an' put a bullet through that kid's head."

"An' let the sheriff come back to a nice mystery, huh?" Poke Jordan growled. "Buck, yuh get worse all the time."

"Yeah?" Buck Martin sneered. "But get this through that knob yuh call a head, Poke. I aim to get into the jail, find Jim Donahue's six-guns that the sheriff would have took off'n him, an' use one o' the younker's own pistols tuh drill him with. I'll make it look like Jim Donahue got scared so bad he cheated the noose with one of his own guns."

"Say, that might work," Poke Jordan whispered tensely. "Scoot, Buck, an' get at it. Yonder comes that fool posse down the street. Good huntin', feller."

CHAPTER IV

"I'm Drillin' Yuh!"

JIM DONAHUE sat on the edge of the narrow iron cot that was in his cell, smoking a cigarette that he did not exactly enjoy. His eyes were angry, brooding. And there was a sardonic twist to his mouth that would have made men who knew him well speak carefully while in his presence.

Jim Donahue was not the sort to go off half cocked, plunge into things without knowing exactly what he was doing. But he was beginning to wonder now if letting the sheriff take his guns and lock him up wasn't about the worst thing he could have done.

Jim Donahue had ridden north from the Border fully expecting trouble, for he knew in his own mind that Poke Jordan would never share the vast Flying W with him and not show resentment. Jim had been prepared for that sort of trouble. But he naturally had not figured on a deputy sheriff's murder entangling him as it had.

Jim had submitted to arrest, feeling sure that the sheriff could not afford to hold him very long.

"I don't pack a saddle gun, so I reckon the coroner's examination of that deputy's body will straighten this out," he mused aloud. "Still, that deputy was killed by Flyin' W men. I wonder if Poke Jordan thinks he can saddle a murder onto me as easy as he got Uncle Ben to

accuse me of stealin' Flyin' W hosses five years ago?"

Jim got up, swore under his breath and flipped the dead cigarette butt over into one corner of the cell. He walked to the little window which looked out upon the main street of the town and stood there, watching a big band of riders forming before the saloon. Those riders moved on after a few minutes, and Jim paced away from the window.

There was no one else in the cells of the little jail, and the silence of the place made him creepy. Every muscle in his body ached, for he had been in the saddle two days and a night. He had stopped only when his stallion needed rest, and had slept little.

Yet he knew that he could not sleep now, for his mind was seething madly, struggling with the many facets of the problem before him.

He paced restlessly up and down the narrow cell, brow furrowed, lean brown hands closing and unclosing as if he were working stiffness from them. He stopped his pacing suddenly, however, for the shrill whistling of his sorrel stallion had arrested his attention.

The sheriff had taken the stallion and the slain deputy's horse to a corral at the back of the jail, and turned them loose to feed at a hay rack.

Jim Donahue leaped to the little barred window of his cell now, pressed his face close to the bars, and peered out towards the corral.

He could see Drifter's shapely head skimming along above the corral rails as the stallion raced about inside. The moon that had risen a half hour before shed a good light, and Jim Donahue strained his face still harder against the bars, trying to see further into the corral.

The stallion was strictly a one-man horse, and would act up if anyone except Jim Donahue got close to it. Jim had heard Drifter's protesting whistle often enough to know that a man was in that corral now. Jim also knew that if that man tried to rope Drifter there would be trouble, for the stallion hated a rope, and would fight like a cornered wolf if some one tried to pile a loop on him.

BUT the sorrel's head kept skimming above the rails, and Jim Donahue realized that no one was trying to catch him.

But Jim stayed there watching until he saw a man swing over the corral fence and hit the ground on the outside. There was nothin unusual in that, however, for the fellow might have been some one whom the sheriff had asked to look after the corraled horses.

That thought had barely come into Jim Donahue's mind when he realized that such was not the case. The man who had leaped to the ground outside the corral stood crouched, and Jim could see his hat swinging right and left, and knew that the fellow was making sure that no one had seen him climb out of that corral.

Jim stiffened to attention, an electric something playing along his nerves in a pleasantly tingling sensation. There was something vaguely familiar about that *hombre* who stood crouched outside the corral fence. But Jim Donahue could not say just what was familiar about the fellow until he saw him start forward suddenly in a peculiar rolling gait.

"Martin—Buck Martin!" Jim Donahue breathed the name as if it were a curse. "Now what was that backshootin' son doin' in the corral?"

Buck Martin was coming towards the jail at a fast walk, rolling his powerfully built body from side to side in a peculiar manner at each step. Jim Donahue received another

surprise then, for he saw Buck Martin disappear at the back of the jail building, and heard the stealthy squeal of the seldom used back door, which opened into the narrow little corridor that ran between the double row of small cells.

Jim whirled from the window, went to the iron-grilled door, and heard a heavy tread slogging up from the back of the room. A moment later Buck Martin rocked into view, saw Jim, and stopped short. Buck Martin stood there for a long time, his little black eyes raking Jim Donahue up and down.

A LAMP hung on the wall between two cell doors that were almost opposite Jim's cell. The lamp threw plenty of light into Jim's cell, lighting the lean height of him, throwing into sharp relief the rugged solidness of his bronzed face.

"Well, kid, yuh've growed a heap since yuh got run out of this country five years ago," Buck Martin spoke at last. "I'll bet yuh could give me, or Poke either, a good tussle now."

"I didn't used to give you two much of a tussle at that, did I, Buck?" Jim Donahue asked with a calm in his voice that masked his true feelings. "You an' Poke used to whale me when yuh felt like it. Of course, I was only a button, while you two was grown men. Mebbe I *could* give you a tussle now, at that."

"Yeah?" Buck Martin leered. "Lippy as ever, ain't yuh? Kid, I've scorched yore britches more than once for sassin' me. If I didn't have other plans right now, I'd take a poke at yuh."

Before Jim could answer Buck Martin moved on up the narrow corridor and passed into the walled-off space at the front of the room which was the sheriff's office. Buck Martin was cursing under his breath, nerves raw from the evening's strain. He almost leaped at the sheriff's desk and began yanking the drawers open in search of guns.

"That Donahue younker used to pack two guns, like he figgered he might some day know how to use 'em," he muttered as he pawed through the heap of junk in the second drawer he had opened. "The sheriff must have put— Ha-a-a!"

Buck Martin had found a nearly full quart of whiskey in that drawer. He yanked the cork, tilted the bottle to his thick lips, and drank thirstily. He lowered the bottle, heaved a sigh, and opened another drawer.

He found twin .45s that were holstered and rolled up in shell-studded belts. He looked down at the guns with a faint sneer, for he saw instantly that they were the same smoke-poles that Jim Donahue had once packed around in tattered holsters.

If Buck Martin had bothered to unsheath those guns he would have learned, however, that only the frames of the weapons the fifteen-year-old Jim Donahue had carried so proudly remained. Into those frames had been placed new barrels and new cylinders. But Buck Martin recognized the guns by their worn old grips, and his mind inquired no further.

Reaching for the bottle of whiskey, he drank deeply once more, and stood scowling uncertainly towards the door that led back into the corridor where the cells were.

Buck Martin was worried, but not because he was here to do a cold-blooded murder. Just *how* to do that murder and make it look like suicide was the problem that taxed Buck Martin's none too agile brain at the moment.

The simplest way, of course, was to walk back down the corridor to Jim Donahue's cell and shoot him.

But that would not look like suicide, and Buck Martin had to reject the plan. He helped himself to the bottle for the third time, and it was shy a pint of its fiery contents when Martin returned it to the cluttered drawer.

The whiskey was burning new life into his tough body, however, and his old crooked grin was back when he stalked towards the door once more.

He knew now what he must do, and lifted the big key ring from a nail on the wall near the door. Buck Martin meant to free Jim Donahue from the cell, march him up into the sheriff's office, and leave him lying there on the floor near the desk.

Martin grinned even wider when it occurred to him that he could put the key ring back where it belonged after his job was done and poke an old piece of wire into the lock of Jim Donahue's cell.

No, he decided suddenly, he would not leave a piece of ordinary wire in the lock. He'd straighten out one of the cot springs from the cot in Jim Donahue's cell and leave that hanging in the cell door lock, as if Jim had improvised an implement that had freed him.

"I ain't so dumb, at that," Buck Martin congratulated himself as he went down the narrow corridor at his peculiar rolling gait.

He came to Jim Donahue's cell door, opened it with the first key he tried, and stepped back. Jim Donadue got up slowly from his cot, somber eyes slitted, lips tight against his teeth.

"What's the idea, Buck?" Jim asked grimly. "Figger I've been in jail long enough, do yuh?"

Sheriff said turn you loose," Buck Martin grunted. "Come out o' there an' waltz up the corridor ahead of me. Don't try nothin' funny either!"

Jim Donahue bit back the retort that came to his lips, stepped from the cell, and went down along the corridor. Not until he walked out into the sheriff's office and saw his gun belts on the desk did he realize that he was walking into a trap.

One of his holsters was empty, and the cold fingers of dread squeezed at Jim Donahue's heart. He spun quickly, and found himself looking into one of his own big .45s. Behind the cocked and leveled gun was Buck Martin's face, twisted into a mask of sheer savagery.

"Got yuh, yuh damned little snake!" Buck Martin's voice was hoarse, gloating. "Here's where Poke Jordan gets full possession o' the Flyin' W. An' when yuh're found, it'll look like suicide. I'm drillin' yuh now, younker!"

CHAPTER V

Jim Finds a Friend

DESPITE the fact that he was face to face with death Jim Donahue kept his head. In the brief space of time it took Buck Martin to make his gloating speech Jim Donahue measured the distance to his other gun, which still lay there on the sheriff's desk, holstered and rolled inside a shell-studded belt.

Jim Donahue's quick eye also measured the distance to Buck Martin's jaw. He saw that he had little if any chance of reaching either Buck Martin or that gun on the desk.

Buck Martin was panting, as if he had just run a short race. There was cold murder shining in his hot eyes.

"Yeah, Buck, I reckon yuh've got me." Jim Donahue's voice was steady despite the horror that was stealing along his nerves. "So Poke put yuh

up to this, figgerin' that he'd have the whole Flyin' W if I was out of the way, eh?"

Jim Donahue was playing desperately for time. He had but one weapon, and it might prove puny indeed unless it could be used properly. That one weapon was surprise—a shock that would cause Buck Martin to lose his head for a brief second, if it were handled right.

Jim Donahue thought that he was not to get a chance at using that one weapon, however, for he saw Buck Martin's trigger finger curl until the thick knuckles showed white. Then that trigger finger relaxed, and Buck Martin's hoarse laughter crackled through the room.

"Shore Poke will get the Flyin' W spread, kid," he sneered. "An' it was me, not Poke, that figgered out this little play. With my Winchester planted on yore saddle it will shore look like yuh drilled that dep—"

BUCK MARTIN caught himself, swore harshly, and began squeezing on the trigger once more. Jim Donahue laughed suddenly, though every nerve in him was fairly screaming for action, for escape from that blazing death that was about to spurt from the unwavering gun muzzle.

"Yeah, Buck, yuh'll kill me—like you an' them other two killed Deputy Vail in Buzzard Pass this afternoon!"

Jim Donahue had exploded his little bombshell—played the only card he had to play. And it had its desired effect, for Buck Martin came up from his crouch as if he had been kicked under the chin. The Colt in his hand wobbled, and oaths ripped past his lips.

Jim Donahue leaped then, bronzed fists smashing out blows that landed with soggy sounds. Buck Martin went back and down, triggering a slug into the ceiling as he fell. When he rolled half over and righted himself he saw Jim Donahue leaping at the sheriff's desk.

Buck Martin fired, but his haste was too great for accuracy. His slug cut a dull streak across the top of the sheriff's desk just as Jim Donahue whirled, white teeth flashing in what might have been either a grin or snarl.

Jim Donahue had his other Colt in his right fist now, and the weapon boomed just as Buck Martin tried to line the sights for a sure shot.

Buck Martin rocked, lost his balance, and fell sidewise to the floor. He squalled an oath that died in a gagging sound. He was stone dead when Jim Donahue stepped over to him, yanked the gun from his lax fingers and stepped back.

Jim Donahue looked once at the swiftly widening red smear on the front of Buck Martin's greasy flannel shirt, then spun back to the sheriff's desk.

In a few deft motions Jim returned his hot guns to their holsters, wrapped the belts about them, and dropped them back into the desk drawer that stood open. He closed the drawer, leaped down the hallway, and stepped into his cell. Reaching back through the iron bars, he twisted the big key in the lock, then leaned hard against the bars and dangled the key ring in his fingers.

From outside came a hoarse voice and the sound of booted feet along the wooden sidewalk. But Jim Donahue forced himself not to listen to those sounds.

It had occurred to him that being found outside his cell and having to admit that he had shot it out with Buck Martin would do anything but help his case in this country where he was already branded a horse thief. But if he could get that damning key ring away from his cell door and let himself be

found still securely locked in his cell, no jury under the sun would connect him with Buck Martin's death.

But could he get those keys where he wanted them?

Jim could see Buck Martin's frowzy black head and one outflung arm, for the squat murderer had fallen almost in the doorway that led from the cell block into the sheriff's office. If he could toss those keys straight up the corridor, and give them heave enough to carry them out into the sheriff's office, no one would ever guess that he had been out of his cell.

"Findin' his pet killer ready for Boot Hill with no suspect handy will shore throw a worry into Poke Jordan, too," Jim Donahue gritted. "But kin I heave this danged key ring that far?"

He balanced the big key ring carefully, swung it to and fro a time or two, and let fly just as boots rattled at the front of the jail building. The key ring arched through the air, traveled on a true course for several feet, then at the last moment took a crazy side trip that brought it in violent contact with the facing of the corridor door. But Jim Donahue had put power behind that toss. The iron key ring jangled noisily, caromed off the door facing, and went skidding from view into the sheriff's office.

Jim Donahue heaved a great sigh of relief and dragged a sleeve across his moist forehead just as the front door of the sheriff's office crashed open.

Men spilled into the room—bartenders, cowboys and miners. Their yells ceased instantly, and for a moment they stood in awed silence, looking down at the sprawled form of a man none of them would have matched gun-speed with.

"Hell's bells, boys, somebody shore put the fixin's on Buck Martin!" a man who wore the white coat and apron of a bartender cried hoarsely. "Wonder who done it?"

"Jim Donahue was jailed here, so the sheriff said," another voice put in, "I'll bet Donahue got out an' Martin tried to stop him. We better—"

"Hey, what's all the racket?" Jim Donahue yelled loudly. "Who done all that shootin' up there?"

Feet pounded rapidly over hard concrete, and a moment later the hallway between the grim little cells was packed with staring men. One grizzled *hombre* in the garb of a miner reached out, hooked gnarled fingers about the bars of Jim Donahue's cell, and tugged sharply.

"If this young feller in this here cage is that Donahue hellion I've been hearin' about all evenin' he shore didn't drill nobody," the old miner called loudly. "Leastwise, he didn't git out of his cell, fer I seen the key ring up yonder in the sheriff's office with that dead gent. This feller might have a gun in that cell with him, though."

THAT suggestion started an uneasy motion among the men crowded into the hallway. Uneasy glances darted towards Jim Donahue, who stood looking stonily at the men before him.

"If anybody has got a key to this coop I'll gladly stand searchin'," Jim growled. "But what was the shootin' about? It ain't nice to be woke up so rude-like when yuh're plumb fagged out from a long ride."

"Somebody drilled Buck Martin, Jim," a thin voice answered. "I'll bet that makes yuh feel plumb bad, now don't it?"

Jim located the speaker—a thin, white-bearded old-timer who looked up at him out of sharp blue eyes. Jim Donahue smiled faintly, for he remembered the little old man instantly as Nelse Varney, maker of

the finest saddles to be found. And Jim Donahue remembered suddenly that Nelse Varney had been friendly to him five years ago, when all other hands had seemed against him.

"Howdy, Mr. Varney," Jim called, poking a lean hand through the bars. "Would you shake with a gent that's called murderer an' hoss thief?"

The little old saddle maker grasped the youth's hand in a firm, brief grip, chuckling through his white beard as he looked up into Jim's face. "Yuh've growed, boy," he commented. "Mebbe some o' the jaspers that used to boot yuh around will get a surprise, eh?"

"Not if this framed-up murder charge agin me sticks!" Jim Donahue bit out. "Looks like I'm scheduled to do a cottonwood jig, Mr. Varney."

"HOW come?" the old man snapped, pressing closer to the bars.

Jim Donahue glanced swiftly right and left. The excited crowd that had poured into the corridor a minute ago was now back in the sheriff's office, talking loudly over the mystery of Buck Martin's death.

"Mr. Varney, yuh was decent to me before," Jim Donahue spoke suddenly, looking levelly down into the old saddle maker's keen eyes. "When my Uncle Ben brought me here to this country I didn't stay but a few months. Why? Because a certain two-legged skunk framed a hoss stealin' onto me."

"I wondered how a fifteen-year-old boy that didn't know the country a-tall could drive off twenty head of good Flyin' W hosses, git 'em to the Border, an' find a buyer all in three days," old Nelse Varney grinned sourly. "That's the way I put it up to yore Uncle Ben, son. But ol' Ben was so wrapped up in that sidewinder of a stepson of his that he wouldn't listen to me. But what's this new trouble yuh're in? I heard that yuh drilled Depity Ralph Vail over in Buzzard Pass this afternoon. That right?"

"Wrong!" Jim rasped. "But I know who *did* salt that deputy down. If I can get that whiskey-soaked sheriff tuh let me out of here I'll start clearin' a few things up fer him."

"Em Kirk used to be a good sheriff," the old saddle maker shrugged, "but the past few years he's been hittin' the booze too much to know his business. Yuh told him what you know about the depity's death?"

"No," Jim Donahue said tensely. "An' for gosh sakes, Mr. Varney, don't you tell a soul what I've said. I've got to get some proof to back my word, for nobody in this country would believe me since I'm wearin' the hoss thief brand."

"Well, son, I still say that yuh're all right," Nelse Varney gritted. "I knowed Dave Donahue, yore daddy, right well. Dave an' me, we rode some ranges together when we was young fellers. Yuh're Dave all over again—build, looks, disposition an' gun speed."

"Eh?" Jim Donahue started a little. "How do you know anything about my gun speed, Mr. Varney? I was only a button when I was here."

"I come down to the jail some little time ago, son, to have a talk with yuh, figgerin' that we'd be all alone, with the sheriff out o' town," the saddle maker smiled faintly up at Jim. "But when I got here, I heard voices an' decided to do a little peekin' first. Seems I seen yuh waltz out o' this corridor ahead o' Buck Martin. I also seen Buck Martin try to cut yuh in two with lead, after hearin' him tell yuh what he aimed to do."

"Good gosh!" Jim Donahue's voice was a horse whisper. "Then—then yuh know—"

"From where I stood at the winder," Nelse Varney cut in swiftly, "it looked to me like yuh give that damned snake more of a break than he deserved. An' don't worry about that rifle he planted on yore saddle, son. I taken a little trip out to the barn, that's why I was late gittin' in here. Nice Myers hull yuh've got, even if it is fancied up with silver."

"Whew!" Jim whistled softly. "Mr. Varney, I forgot about that rifle. Yuh—yuh aim to tell the sheriff all this?"

"All what?" the little old man snapped sharply. "All I know that'd interest Em Kirk any is that I come down here with a dozen other gents on hearin' shots an' found Buck Martin dead on the floor. Go to bed, son, an' git some sleep."

Before Jim Donahue could voice his thanks to this peppery old-timer who was his friend the chance was gone. The old saddle maker turned and stamped away, melting into the sheriff's office where the others were milling about excitedly.

CHAPTER VI

Knuckle Soup

THEN Jim Donahue did sleep, for the thought that he had at least one friend in this country put him at rest. Not until a heavy voice boomed in his ears did he awaken to see clean sunlight filtering through the narrow, barred window that was high in one wall of his cell.

He kicked the blanket that had covered him aside, reached for trousers and boots, dressing leisurely, despite the fact that Sheriff Emery Kirk was cursing him through the bars of the cell door.

Jim Donahue turned at last towards the officer, combed lean fingers through his tangled black hair and reached for the makin's as a matter of morning habit. He twisted a quirley, got it going, then sauntered towards the cell door.

"Mornin', Sheriff," he drawled, "yuh act like yore stummick was sour, yore liver torpid an' yore spleen was bustin' open. Yuh're pale, too—all but yore nose. Got a headache?"

A snicker sounded behind the sheriff, and Jim Donahue saw for the first time that a bunch of men stood there in the narrow corridor with the sheriff.

"Smart, ain't yuh?" the flabby officer growled. "Damn your thievin' soul, Jim Donahue, what happened here last night? Who killed Buck Martin?"

"Why, I did," Donahue grinned cheerfully at the weary-eyed sheriff whose appearance showed that he had just got in from his trip to Buzzard Pass. "I waltzed right out this here barred door, took a six-gun, an' shot Mr. Martin, Sheriff. That's gospel."

And it most assuredly was gospel! But Sheriff Em Kirk evidently did not think so. His flabby face went dark with rage, and he banged the bars until the steel door rattled noisily.

"Stop tellin' lies an' answer my question!" he roared. "I've talked to over a dozen fellers that come down here when they heard the shootin'. Yuh was still locked in this cell, Jim Donahue, an' the keys was plumb up yonder on the office floor. Who done that shootin'?"

"Shucks, yuh don't believe me, so I'll not say anything else." Jim chuckled softly. "Yuh gonna let me out o' here, or do I get yuh into a mess for lockin' me up without cause?"

The sheriff's face went darker than ever, and Jim Donahue heard him cursing under his breath. But the big officer was uneasy as well as

angry, for his pale, bloodshot eyes rolled towards the crowd, then back, in a nervous way.

"That damned coroner claims that my deputy was killed by six rifle slugs enterin' him," the sheriff croaked. "Since yore saddle don't have a rifle on it I reckon I will have to turn yuh loose. But get this, Jim Donahue. I think you kilt my deputy, an' I'll see you hang fer it if it's the last thing I ever do!"

The sheriff produced the big key ring, opened the door, and yanked it wide with a snarl. Jim Donahue stalked out, somber eyes slitted as he watched the crowd back away.

He stalked on into the sheriff's office, turned, and moved over close to the scarred old desk. Buck Martin had been carried away, but there was still a dark red splotch on the concrete floor where he had lain.

"Well, what yuh waitin' for?" Sheriff Kirk thundered as he waddled into the room. "Get out of here, yuh hoss thief, before I—"

"I'll take my guns, Sheriff," Jim Donahue said softly. "An' don't make any more noise with your mouth. Call me a hoss thief just once more an' I'll knock some of the meanness out of yuh. Hand over my guns, or else make every other man in town shed his cutters."

THE sheriff started to answer, but something in the hunch of Jim Donahue's husky shoulders and the glint of his somber eyes warned the officer that he had gone just about as far as he dared.

Snarling oaths, the sheriff dropped into the chair behind his desk, yanked a drawer open, and lifted Jim Donahue's belts and guns out. He flung them onto the desk top, face white now with rage and the hellish craving for alcohol that had beset him for hours.

"Take yore guns an' clear out," the sheriff snarled. "But remember this. I'm ridin' yore sign until I pin Ralph Vail's murder on yuh. It ain't hard to hide a Winchester out yonder in that Buzzard Pass country. Now git!"

Jim Donahue settled the criss-crossed cartridge belts about his lean waist, shoved the holsters into place on his thighs and thonged them down.

Without another word he strolled out through the door and onto the wooden sidewalk. His lips thinned suddenly, and his hands seemed to swing a little less freely at his sides. For standing a few rods away were Poke Jordan, Dick Prout and the Mexican, Felix Escobedo, whose name Jim Donahue did not yet know. He walked towards the trio in lithe, easy strides, humming a little under his breath, somber eyes unblinking.

"Well, yuh've come back, hey?" Poke Jordan greeted hotly. "What happened in that jail last night? Who snuck yuh a gun an' left you kill Buck? Talk, yuh damned maverick, or I'll—"

"Yuh'll what, Poke?" Jim Donahue's voice had a soft, silky tone that Poke Jordan was to learn to dread. "It's been a long time, Poke, since I taken a beatin' off'n you. Mabbe I've outgrowed the habit."

"Bust him wide open, Poke!" Dick Prout snarled, "or give me the word an' I'll do it. He can't hand yuh that kind of talk an' get by with it, kin he?"

"Keep yore mouth shut, Dick!" Poke Jordan snarled, slouching forward to stand before Jim Donahue. "This kid seems to think he kin sass me, so I'll put him in his place. How's *this?*"

"This" was an open-handed slap with power enough behind it to have dazed a man. But the slap never landed on Jim Donahue's mouth as Poke Jordan had intended it to. Jim

Donahue's head rocked aside, and the next moment he was slithering forward, lean hands shooting out.

Poke Jordan squalled in alarm, for he felt himself seized by the shoulder and whirled. Those fingers on his shoulder bit down like steel brands, and Poke Jordan began clawing at his guns, kicking backwards blindly with a spurred heel at the same time. But before he could free himself from the powerful hand that bit his shoulder Poke felt himself shooting upward and out.

Felix Escobedo and Dick Prout were bawling oaths as they danced about, hands on guns. Their swearing increased to a frenzy when Poke Jordan came sailing through the air towards them, long arms windmilling wildly.

Dick Prout and the Mexican tried to dodge, but were a split second too late. Poke Jordan's lean body slewed sidewise in the air and swiped Dick Prout and the Mexican down as a scythe might cut two tough weeds at a single swing.

As the murderous trio went sprawling off the sidewalk and into the loose dirt of the street, Jim Donahue was over them, shucking guns from their holsters as they writhed apart.

Jim tossed the guns far out into the street as he took them, then stepped back, waiting until the three *hombres* untangled themselves and came boiling up.

A crowd had formed swiftly. And there were three dust-smeared men clawing at empty holsters and trying dazedly to figure out what had happened to them.

Jim Donahue stepped forward suddenly, and there was the dull smack of flesh striking flesh when his lean right arm whipped out and up.

Dick Prout sat down hard, bawling an oath as he grabbed at his chin.

But Felix Escobedo and Poke Jordan had gathered their wits now, and were rushing. Jim Donahue knew that he would likely get himself whipped, for Poke Jordan was a salty scrapper and the lean Mexican moved with a lithe, sure-footed tread that would be difficult to match.

But whipping or no whipping, Jim aimed to take full enjoyment of this little fracas.

Grinning, he stepped forward unexpectedly and smashed a left cross to Felix Escobedo's snarling lips that sent the Mexican crashing back into Dick Prout, who was just scrambling to his feet. Dick and the Mexican went down, and Jim Donahue turned on Poke Jordan.

He turned just in time to discover that he had failed to disarm Poke completely, for Poke was lunging at him now with a heavy-loaded quirt seized by the leash and already whipping down.

BEFORE Jim could even try to dodge the loaded quirt, the stock crashed into his temple, and he flopped sidewise and down, weak in every muscle.

He tried to move but discovered that his body was leaden and refused to respond to the dim urges of his shock-fogged brain. But Jim Donahue was not out, and could see Poke Jordan stalking towards him, the quirt reversed now and ready to deal out stinging punishment.

Poke Jordan's voice was lifted for the benefit of the crowd that had formed.

"All right, hoss thief," he said, "here's where I teach you some manners."

The quirt crashed down, whistling like a bullet. Jim Donahue felt it across his face, but knew little of the pain it inflicted.

He was skidding over the brink of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER VII

"Yonder Comes Escobedo!"

WHEN Jim Donahue regained consciousness he was in the back of Nelse Varney's saddle shop, stretched out on the cluttered floor. The little old saddle maker was standing over him, cussing in a steady whine that made his white beard bob and jerk convulsively.

Jim sat up slowly, groaning at the pain in his lank body. He felt as if a herd of dogies had stampeded over him, and there was a raw feeling to his whole face.

He lifted a lean and grimy hand, passed it down first one cheek then the other. His trembling fingers encountered innumerable cuts and welts, and there was blood on his fingers when he looked at them.

"What happened?" he asked thickly, aware that even talking hurt. "All I seem to remember is gettin' clouted with a quirt."

"Here, have a look," old Nelse Varney rasped, and snatched a rusty mirror from above a little wash bench that stood against the back wall of his shop.

Jim Donahue had a look—and yelped as if someone had prodded him with a hot pitchfork. His face was swollen, distorted, smeared with blood and grime.

"Poke Jordan quirt-whupped yuh an' tromped yuh from head to foot afore I got there an' stuck my gun in his belly an' backed him off!" the saddle maker snarled. "Son, if yuh don't shoot that sidewinder, I will. He's down yonder in the Cowboy's Palace now, makin' his brags that he'll run yuh out of town afore sundown."

Without a word Jim Donahue got to his feet, went to the wash bench, and sloshed water from a zinc bucket into a battered granite-ware basin.

He bathed his face and head carefully, dried on a clean towel that hung on a nail, and turned with a crooked grin on his battered face. Still without speaking he drew his twin guns, inspected them carefully, and replaced the shells that had been fired from each the night before.

"Don't get so het up about what happened, Mr. Varney." Jim's voice was calm as he finally spoke. "Me, mebbe, I better get out of town afore sundown. That Poke Jordan is a plumb tough *hombre,* seems like."

And with that Jim Donahue stepped out through the back door, leaving the old saddle maker standing with slack jaw and bulging eyes.

Jim Donahue even chuckled a little as he swung swiftly along a littered alleyway. But as he chuckled there were lights in his eyes that spelled trouble for somebody.

"It's mebbe tough on my feelin's, but I'm sorta glad that Poke Jordan thinks he can still bully me all he pleases," Jim drawled as he headed for the corral behind the jail. "With the snake feelin' plumb safe, mebbe I kin get some of the things done that I've got tuh do."

He reached the corral, whistled a greeting to the sorrel stallion, then crawled through the bars. A few moments later he rode out of town, keeping to the backs of as many of the buildings as he could. He chuckled once, for he saw the Mexican, Felix Escobedo, watching him from a street corner.

Jim Donahue was heading south, as if he meant to ride back towards Buzzard Pass and the Border. But once beyond the town he cut into rough country, and sent Drifter swinging north by west.

Something like two hours later he

was jogging up the long, tree bordered lane that led to the great Flying W ranchhouse. He saw men moving about the place, but paid them no heed as he passed the yard gate and went on towards the corral. Jim Donahue's keen eyes had caught a dust cloud lifting from that corral long before he reached the ranch.

He rode up to the corral now, stood high in the stirrups, and peered over the top bars.

He saw that there were close to a hundred head of horses in the large inclosure— Flying W horses that had unquestionably been brought in from the range within the last few days.

Jim heard boots pounding towards him from the ranchhouse, and turned to ride back, battered features flushed with excitement. Three cowboys were swarming towards him, their hands on guns as they ran. Jim drew rein at the yard fence and waited for them to come steaming up.

"Hey, who in hell are yuh?" a grizzled, long-built waddy demanded angrily. "What yuh pokin' yore snoot into yonder corral for?"

"Hey, Mack, look at that feller's face!" another of the trio nudged the waddy. "Looks like he already poked his head into somethin' that was none of his business, don't it?"

"Who told you to corral them hosses?" Jim Donahue snapped.

"Say, yuh tryin' to be funny?" Mack snorted. "What business is it of yores when an' why the Flyin' W decides to corral its hosses?"

"Oh, don't mind me!" Jim's voice was flat, biting. "I'm only half owner of the place. The name's Jim Donahue in case yuh don't remember me, Mr. Mack Lacey."

The grizzled Mack Lacey jumped nervously, brown eyes squinting keenly beneath shaggy brows.

"Howlin' hellions!" he laughed suddenly. "Jim, yuh've growed a heap! But with that face o' yores all clawed up I never would have knowed yuh."

There was no particular welcome in the cowboy's voice. In fact Mack Lacey seldom showed much interest in anything. He had been ramrod of the mighty Flying W for years— until Poke Jordan had taken his place. Since that time old Mack had gone about his duties glumly, a soured man who looked upon life with bitterness in his heart.

"Never mind my face, Mack," Jim clipped. "I asked you howcome them hosses penned instead of bein' out on the range where they belong."

"POKE'S orders," the puncher snorted disgustedly. "He tells us boys to round 'em up an' hold 'em here. I didn't ast no questions."

"But yuh could make a guess, I reckon, Mack," a bow-legged little waddy beside old Mack snorted. "Man, yuh know as well as I do that Poke an' them three runnin' mates of his is fixin' to take these hosses acrost the Border like they have other bunches we rounded up. If I owned half this spread—"

"Button that lip o' yores, Shorty Freeman, afore yuh git yore foot in yore fool mouth!" old Mack cut in harshly. "Better keep yore ideas to yoreself, runt."

"Don't listen to that sour-crawed old fossil, Shorty!" Jim Donahue ripped out. "Yore speech interests me a heap, feller. So Poke an' his three side-kicks have been takin' Flyin' W stock across the Border right along, have they?"

"There, yuh buck-toothed little pest!" old Mack snarled. "Yuh've started somethin' now, young feller. This fool Jim Donahue will go after Poke, an' Poke will find out what yuh've said. Besides, yuh don't know whether Poke an' his friends taken

them hosses acrost the Border or not."

"I don't?" Shorty snapped, glancing uneasily at the gangly, tow-headed Flying W puncher who stood beside him. "Me an' Tom Benson, here, follered that last night drive Poke Jordan made to see where it went. Didn't we, Tom?"

Tom grinned sheepishly, blue eyes shuttling guiltily towards old Mack's stormy countenance.

"We sho' did, Shawty," Tom Benson drawled to Jim Donahue. "An', like yo' done said, Shawty, them hosses went to the Bawdah an' acrost it."

"Right interestin'!" Jim Donahue bit out. "Mack, go turn them hosses out the corral yonder. I'll—"

"Yuh'll get the devil, feller!" old Mack almost yelled. "Yonder comes Felix Escobedo, an' he's ridin' like he had fire in his eyes. I reckon yuh'll git worse than yore face scratched if yuh don't skin out, Jim. That Mex is plenty ornery!"

CHAPTER VIII

Escobedo Meets His Match

FELIX ESCOBEDO did indeed have fire in his jetty eyes. It was the fire of humiliation and hate that burned his soul, and at sight of Jim Donahue the Mexican's hate mounted.

Escobedo's lips were split and still bleeding where the fist of Jim Donahue had landed. Through those split lips the Mexican's teeth gleamed like bits of china as he brought his foam-flecked gelding to a halt.

Felix Escobedo's slender right hand was hovering above the butt of the gun he wore as he flipped himself lithely from the saddle and struck the ground facing Jim Donahue.

Old Mack Lacey swore a rasping oath and got quickly out of line, Shorty Freeman and the lank Tom Benson following suit.

"Hold on, Felix!" old Mack called sharply. "This is Jim Donahue, half owner o' this spread now that his uncle has passed on. Yuh better not—"

"Keep shut the mouth, Mack!" Escobedo's voice was a thin whine. "Me, I have meet thees so brave *hombre* all ready."

"So your name is Felix Escobedo, eh?" Jim Donahue drawled, and his voice had that silky note. "That name would look right good on a tombstone, Mr. Escobedo. Was you thinkin' of drawin' that gun?"

"When I draw thees gon, dog, you get the bullet in the gizzard!" Felix snarled. "Me, I watch when you leave the town, so that I, Felix Escobedo, might follow an' have the pleasure of avenging myself. You fool me for a time when you turn, but no trail ees too hard for me to follow. So I have come."

"An' brought a right plain scent of skunk along with yuh," Jim Donahue purred. "Felix, where do you want my lead to take you? If you ever touch the butt of that gun, yuh snake, I'll kill yuh."

"Pipe down, Jim!" old Mack called throatily. "Damn it, that Mex is pizen with his hardware. Yuh ain't got a chance agin him, son."

"Me, I figger different, Mack," Jim called without turning his head. "I've never seen a murderer yet that didn't have a yellow streak up his back. An' this Mex is a murderer. I was mighty close to him an' two others when they killed that deputy sheriff in Buzzard Pass yesterday."

As that accusation had worked on Buck Martin the night before it now worked on Felix Escobedo.

The Mexican's breath came in a whistling gasp, and the color slowly drained from his coppery features, leaving him a dirty brown color.

His ebony eyes dilated slowly, and Jim Donahue saw him begin to tremble violently.

As the Mexican shook in his boots, Jim Donahue stepped forward, swung a stiff, fast left uppercut, and stretched Felix Escobedo full length in the dirt. But that wiry Mexican bounced up at once, and hand pawing at his gun, Spanish oaths ripping from his twitching lips.

Jim Donahue grinned, stepped in close, and seized Felix Escobedo by the gun wrist with one hand and by the trouser belt with the other. Felix Escobedo cried out, as Poke Jordan had cried out once that day. The Mexican was lifted bodily, then slammed out and down as if he were a sack of grain.

Felix hit the ground, dropped the gun he had finally succeeded in drawing, and began gasping audibly, breathless from the jolt. Jim Donahue stepped over to him, fastened steely fingers in his greasy shirt collar, and heaved him upright.

"Now, yuh two-bit, back-shootin' specimen, yuh're gonna talk," Jim rasped savagely. "Why did you three murder that deputy yesterday? Talk, you vinegaroon, or I'll start workin' on yuh like I meant it."

To give emphasis to what he said, Jim shook the Mexican roughly, stopping only when Felix Escobedo's voice lifted in a wail of mercy.

Old Mack Lacey and the other two Flying W men were simply bug-eyed and tongue-tied with amazement. They watched, but said no word while Felix Escobedo stood panting like a spent runner, a frowzy, dusty, beaten badman who had bullied them all.

"Yuh follered me, intendin' to settle accounts with me, Escobedo," Jim Donahue's voice cut through the tense silence like the crackle of a distant gun exploding. "Yuh've found me, *ladrone,* an' been lucky. I should have let yuh make a play fer your artillery, then drilled your hide full of holes. Start talkin' *hombre.* Why were yuh an' them other two that I could name, up yonder in Buzzard Pass? Why did yuh kill that deputy sheriff?"

"Because I am a Mexican you beat me!" Felix cried hoarsely. "An' those three yonder, they weel not help me, though they have call me friend."

"Yuh're a liar when yuh say I'm rough-handlin' yuh because yuh're a Mexican, Escobedo!" Jim Donahue rapped out. "Down yonder on the Border I've got some mighty fine friends who are Mexicans. An' if one of them Mexicans was in my boots right now you'd be kickin' around with a slug in your belly."

"An' what ever give yuh the idea that any o' us boys would help yuh, Felix?" Shorty Freeman spoke up suddenly. "Yuh have abused us three more than once—when Poke, Dick an' Buck was handy to back yore play. Yuh got yoreself tangled up with that wildcat, now finish yore fightin'."

"HE'LL finish up alongside his pardner, Buck Martin, if he don't start talkin'," Jim Donahue growled, and gave Felix Escobedo another shaking.

Again the Mexican yelled for mercy, and began talking the moment he caught his breath. The fight had suddenly gone out of him. Yet there was a cunning in his eye that Jim Donahue did not miss. And the very fact that Felix talked so freely warned Jim that the oily devil had some scheme hidden up his sleeve.

"Those other two an' me, we plan to keel you, not those fool deputy," Felix snarled at Jim defiantly. "The light, eet was not so good, so we make the mistake—"

"Poke Jordan sent you three up there to get me, huh?" Jim gritted.

"*Si*, Poke send us," the Mexican grinned thinly. "An' now Poke, he have the fits because Buck Martin ees found dead. You do that, no?"

Jim Donahue's shrug could have been either denial or admission. He was scowling darkly, mind working rapidly, trying to ferret out the reason for Escobedo's sudden willingness to talk. That the Mexican had told the absolute truth, Jim did not doubt in the least. But why was Felix so eager to tell what he knew? Why was he grinning slyly even now? What treachery was the murderous devil planning?

"What in blazes are yuh two talkin' about?" old Mack Lacey thundered suddenly. "Jim, what's this about a depity sheriff gettin' killed? An' did yuh say that Buck Martin got salted down?"

"I'll explain later, Mack," Jim growled. "Right now, I've got me a slippery Mex to deal with."

"An' now that I have talk, *muchacho*, what you do?" Felix Escobedo almost chuckled as he spoke. "You can not eat me, that is a fact. So what you do; take me to the sheriff?"

JIM DONAHUE felt as if a weight had suddenly been lifted now. Felix Escobedo had blundered, had shown his hole card. So Felix expected to be carted into town and turned over to the sheriff, did he?

Jim Donahue laughed, and the sound was not pleasant. The sheriff, blind to what actually went on around him, would never lock a friend of Poke Jordan's up on Jim Donahue's say so. Jim knew that.

He also knew that he had to keep Felix Escobedo from reaching Poke Jordan. Let Poke find out that Mack Lacey, Tom Benson and Shorty Freeman had heard Escobedo's confession, and the three punchers would be killed to keep their mouths shut.

Jim Donahue had sense enough to know that three more murders would not bother Poke Jordan's conscience in the least. Poke was into this thing far enough already to draw a hangman's noose if he was caught.

"Sorry, Felix, but I'll have to throw a hitch into yore little plan," Jim Donahue spoke sharply. "The sheriff would turn yuh loose if I took yuh to him. So I'm takin' yuh over to a place I know of where yuh'll be safe until I—no yuh don't!"

With a scream of rage the Mexican whirled and would have dived for his fallen gun. But Jim Donahue drove a fist to the Mexican's ear that sent him flopping sidewise in a limp heap. Jim picked Felix up, threw him across the grey's saddle, and lashed him there securely.

"What's it all about, Donahue?" Tom Benson asked excitedly. "Me an' Shorty, here, is about to bust our belly bands, we're that curious. What's all this talk about murder an' sech?"

Jim Donahue explained briefly how the deputy had been killed the day before and who had done it. He mentioned Buck Martin's finish, but did not admit doing the job himself.

"Yuh three can string your bets with me or not," he told them flatly. "Mack, yuh might be foreman o' this spread again if my plans work out. On the other hand, I may wind up in Boot Hill. No can tell yet."

"Poke an' them three he herded with has shore been tough on us three," old Mack growled. "I reckon, Jim, us boys will sorta string our bets with yuh!"

"*Bueno, amigos!*" Jim Donahue grinned tightly as Shorty and Tom nodded their approval of old Mack's decision. "If yuh're with me, saddle your best hosses, let them broncs out

of the corral yonder, an' come on."

"Comin'!" Shorty and Tom chorused.

"Yeah, me too!" old Mack growled. "But where we headin', Jim?"

"To snag us a sheriff!" Jim Donahue laughed coldly.

CHAPTER IX

A Proddy Sheriff

ESCOBEDO was a mighty sick *hombre* when Jim Donahue finally untied him from the saddle and hauled him to the ground. Felix snarled weakly as he was shoved towards the door of a stout little log cabin that was used as a Flying W line camp in the winter. The cabin was a deep, well-sheltered valley, above which craggy peaks towered in silent sentinel duty.

"You know where you are, Felix, so don't spend so much time gawkin'," Jim growled. "Inside, yuh buzzard, an' make it snappy. I've got work to do."

The Mexican tried groggily to resist by bracing his feet against the door sill. Jim Donahue reached around him, opened the door, and gave the seat of his pants a sharp kick.

Felix went into the one-roomed line shack with a sputtering snarl, lost his footing, and fell headlong.

"All right, Mack!" Jim Donahue called. "Get those log chains an' the locks an' go to work. I'll gouge out some chinkin' from this side."

"What ees thees?" Felix Escobedo snarled weakly as Jim stepped past him and began probing at the chinking in the log wall with a hatchet that had stood beside the wood box in one corner.

"Yuh'll find out what's what soon enough, *hombre,*" Jim growled.

Felix spat an oath, but kept quiet, since a two hour ride across a saddle, face down, had made him mighty shaky. He heard pounding outside the log shack, then saw daylight between logs as the mud and split stick chinking fell away.

Then some one from outside poked a chain through, which Jim Donahue ran back out through another hole in the chinking on the upper side of the log under which the chain had appeared.

There was a moment's wait, then an end of the chain was poked into the cabin again. Jim Donahue took it this time, and reached a hand through the opened chinking. A moment later he stepped towards Felix Escobedo, stooped, and drew the chain about the Mexican's neck snugly, yet not tight enough to choke him.

Felix heard a dull click even as he reached up, but Jim Donahue was already stepping away, a mirthless grin on his lips.

"The padlock!" the Mexican cried as his fingers found the big lock that held the chain snugly about his neck. "You have lock thees chain to my neck, an' for that I weel keel you."

"The other end is locked around that log in the wall over yonder, with the lock outside," Jim Donahue snapped. "Yuh'll not kill me or anybody else for a while, skunk. As we rode over here, old Mack told me how Poke Jordan, Dick Prout, Buck Martin an' you have been runnin' off good-sized herds of Flyin' W cattle an' sellin' 'em acrost the Border."

Jim Donahue turned suddenly and left the room, slamming the door on Felix Escobedo's strident cries for mercy. There was nothing in the cabin with which the Mexican could free himself, for Jim had brought the hatchet out with him.

He tossed the hatchet aside now, closed the shack's door, and ran the wooden peg down through the hasp to keep it shut. Old Mack and the

other two were there waiting, eyeing Jim Donahue a little uneasily.

"Yuh—yuh shore yuh want to go ahead an' capture the sheriff?" old Mack asked uneasily. "Em Kirk is a sot, but he'll fight, Jim. Mebbe yuh better not try it."

"It's the only way, I tell you!" Jim bit out grimly. "If we can get the sheriff out here with Felix Escobedo an' keep him until he sobers up, mebbe we can make him listen to reason."

"Not Em Kirk," old Mack argued, and was still arguing the same point when they came in sight of Sage some time later.

"You three better cut acrost an' hit the main trail over yonder now," Jim called. "Mack, will you go through with your part? Will you coax that danged star-toter out to that cabin where the Mex is an' then run off with his hoss, like I told yuh to?"

"US three will do our best, Jim," Mack Lacey answered. "But if yuh ask me, I think we're gettin' ourselves in a peck o' trouble."

"Bein' in trouble won't hurt yuh none," Jim Donahue growled. "Get goin', boys. I'll circle an' come into town from the other side. If we pass each other on the street or anything just act like you never saw me before. But get that booze-hound that wears the law badge. He don't know it, but he's due to sober up."

Jim Donahue was gone then, sending his great stallion away at a smoothly flowing gallop that brought a low murmur of applause from the three Flying W cowboys. Jim circled as he had said he would, and a half hour later was jogging leisurely into Sage from the south.

He left Drifter ground anchored before a general store and walked up along the street, fully aware of the curious glances that were turned on him.

The story of his humiliation at Poke Jordan's hands had traveled over the town like wildfire, and Jim Donahue knew that his cut and bruised face would bear out even the wildest rumors that were going the rounds. But such things bothered him little.

From the tail of his eye he saw old Mack and the other two Flying W cowboys, hanging around the sheriff's office and watching the street.

"Kirk is out, so those three are waitin' for him to come back instead o' going up the street lookin' for him," Jim muttered under his breath. "Which shows that ol' Mack has got hoss sense, even if he has taken too much abuse off Poke Jordan an' them others."

Jim turned into the mouth of a steep stairway suddenly and clumped up into a short, dingy hallway that ran before him like a gloomy tunnel. He walked slowly along the corridor, saw a door lettered T. W. Pryor, Attorney at Law, and turned the knob. Jim spent the better part of an hour with the frowzy little attorney, going over the affairs of the Flying W.

When Jim again reached the street he noticed with a quickening of pulse that the three Flying W men were no longer loafing in front of the sheriff's office. Their horses were gone, too, and Jim knew that they had carried out their part of the scheme by getting the sheriff out of town on some excuse or other.

"Keno!" he breathed. "Now I'll fork my Drifter hoss, cut out acrost the range, an' get to that cabin about the time Mack gets the sheriff there. An' after that—"

Jim Donahue did not finish, for at that moment a shrill scream that was almost human lifted, and he whirled quickly, eyes shuttling to where he had left his horse. A crowd was boiling around the

stallion, a crowd that was trying to scatter as Drifter reared and snorted.

"Hey, clear away from that hoss!" Jim yelled, and began running.

He saw as he approached that there was one man who did not run. That man hung to Drifter's bridle reins, and was beating at the stallion's head with what looked like part of a wagon spoke. Jim Donahue saw that the man who was abusing his horse was Dick Prout, the Flying W bronc tamer.

Something seemed to snap in Jim's brain as he flung roughly through the crowd, seized Dick Prout by the nape of the neck, and yanked him savagely back.

Prout whirled, snarling an oath at this interruption. "Yuh, eh?" he bawled. "Damn yore measley hide, keep yore hands off'n me. I'm tamin' that stud if it's the last thing I ever do."

There were broken places in the skin across Drifter's face where the stout club had landed. Jim Donahue saw that, and his face became a white mask of rage.

Dick Prout was swearing again, and the heavy club he held started up, aimed this time at Jim Donahue's head. Jim dodged, but in his white hot rage disregarded the real danger. The club caught him a slanting blow across the neck and jaw, dropping him to the dirt.

Dick Prout rushed with a bellow of savage delight, booted feet swinging viciously. Jim Donahue took two punishing blows in the ribs from those booted feet, then rolled clear, lurched up. Dick Prout was at him instantly, club swinging, face split in a hideous grin.

The crowd that had formed to watch Dick Prout maul the stallion became wildly excited now, for it seemed certain that Jim Donahue would receive another beating. But Jim's first white hot anger had cooled to a smoldering fire, and his brain was working smoothly again.

He dodged clear of the whistling club this time, then stepped in swiftly and began ripping short, punishing blows to Dick Prout's tough body. The bronc stomper roared in rage, brought his club into play once more, and succeeded in landing a blow across Jim Donahue's ribs that sent him reeling.

Dick Prout rushed madly, following his advantage with a yelp of triumph. But Jim Donahue recovered his balance, sidestepped, and smashed a long right to Dick Prout's face that all but upset him. Jim drove a left to Prout's stomach, and the bronc-buster doubled over with a loud grunt. Jim seized the club, give it a quick wrench, and tore it from the red-headed killer's calloused fingers. Jim tossed the cudgel aside, then stepped back, a slow, hard grin on his battered face.

"SO you figgered to tame Drifter like yuh always tamed hosses —by beatin' him half to death before you tried ridin' him." Jim Donahue's voice was so soft that many of the onlookers thought that he was not even angry. "Dick, yuh used to beat me just for the fun of it. Here's where I pay back some of that debt —with interest."

"Yuh—yuh jumped me when I wasn't lookin'," Dick Prout snarled. "Yuh've landed some lucky punches, kid, but I can lick yuh any time, anywhere."

And with that Dick Prout rushed, sure of himself since he had beaten Jim Donahue severely many times. But Jim Donahue had been just a youngster five years ago. He was a man now—a cool-headed, hard-muscled man who had ramrodded one of the toughest spreads along the Border for over two years.

Dick Prout found himself butting a veritable wall of flying fists that left him weak, dazed, sick. Blood

dribbled from his nose, his lips were smashed, and one eye was closing rapidly. He staggered back, cursing hoarsely, trying to figure out just what had happened. But Jim Donahue gave him no time to think.

Dick Prout fought wildly, yet his flailing fists landed few blows. He realized suddenly that Jim Donahue was giving him the worst sort of a whipping by punching just hard enough to punish, and not hard enough to stun. Reeling, bloody froth ringing his battered lips, Dick Prout staggered blindly this way and that, cursing in a steady, whining snarl.

FEAR gripped him now, for it soaked through his twisted brain that he was not only being whipped but shamed before men who had cowered and slunk away at his fight talk more than once.

"By God, I'll kill yuh!" he roared suddenly, and made a grab for the twin guns that banged against his hips.

But something seemed to explode inside his skull, and for some reason or other the guns were too heavy for him to lift. Dimly, Dick Prout realized that Jim Donahue had finally delivered a stunning blow. The bronc stomper was out cold when his battered, blood smeared face struck the dirt of the street. Jim Donahue stepped back, panting heavily, hot lights dancing in his somber eyes.

The crowd that had watched in silence shifted uneasily under that penetrating stare. Then a hoarse voice bawled something, and Poke Jordan was burrowing through the crowd, elbowing men roughly. Poke stopped short at what he saw, tawny eyes flaming dangerously as he hooked his bony hands above gun butts.

"You want some more of what I give yuh a while ago, huh?" Poke Jordan snarled.

"You ought to be shot, just on general principles, Poke," Jim Donahue cut in almost softly. "But I don't think yuh'll give me a chance to do it, fella. Yuh usually hire yore killin's done, Poke. Even if yore hired gunnies do make mistakes sometimes. Deputy Ralph Vail likely had a lot of friends around here, Poke."

A horrible and sickening fear leaped into the eyes of Poke Jordan. His long-jawed face went the color of a dead fish's belly, and with a hoarse word he turned to burrow back through the crowd and almost run towards the Cowboy's Palace.

Jim Donahue watched the loose-gaited rascal lope away, then turned to Drifter and ran an exploring hand over the stallion's head and face. There were welts and cuts in the skin, but Drifter, except for nervousness, seemed little the worse for his experience with Dick Prout.

Jim mounted to the silver crusted black saddle he had won in a Nogales rodeo, turned the stallion, and rode away through a lane that formed before him as the crowd shifted. Jim Donahue brought his dull rowels into play then and Drifter shot down the street in mighty leaps.

Uneasiness rode with Jim Donahue as he left the town and started out across the open rangeland, for he had wasted too much time back there. He had meant to be at the Flying W line camp where Felix Escobedo was held prisoner by the time old Mack got the sheriff out there.

But that was out of the question now, for Jim had wasted a precious fifteen minutes giving Dick Prout a soundly deserved and much needed whipping.

That delay bothered Jim Donahue a lot as he tore across the rangeland, for he doubted if old Mack Lacey would go very far towards detaining the big sheriff. Old Mack had taken abuse too long to have much sand,

and Jim Donahue's fears mounted with each passing minute.

And those fears became a certainty when at last he dipped into the deep valley and started towards the line cabin. Four men were galloping down the creek bottom towards him —the three Flying W cowboys and the ponderous sheriff. Jim Donahue saw that the Flying W men were bound to their saddles. He saw, too, that the big sheriff had spotted him.

Jim halted, a sense of baffled rage flooding him. As he had feared, old Mack had lacked the sand to get the drop on the sheriff and keep him prisoner. Mack's eyes dropped sheepishly as he and the other two securely bound prisoners were led up. The sheriff dropped the rope which led the three mounts of the captives.

"Where's Felix Escobedo?" Jim Donahue snarled savagely, although he already knew the answer.

"Loose!" Shorty Freeman spat angrily. "Old Mack wouldn't let us go through with yore plan, Jim. An' this star-toter turned that Mex loose an' arrested us three."

"Yuh plumb right yuh're under arrest!" the sheriff bawled, big face purple with rage. "An' yuh'll suffer for helpin' chain a man by the neck to starve for grub an' water. Jim Donahue, I want you for attempted murder."

The sheriff's flabby fist was already lifting his gun as he spoke.

CHAPTER X

Showdown

NEITHER of the three Flying W men saw Jim Donahue draw. Jim's right hand simply seemed to disappear from where it had rested idly on the saddle horn. Then Donahue's big stallion leaped forward, and there was a dull slapping sound.

Sheriff Emery Kirk wilted slowly, his huge bulk quivering. Old Mack Lacey and the other two Flying W men saw the gun in Jim Donahue's fist then, and knew that that gun had traveled from Jim's holster to the crown of the sheriff's big head in a lightning stroke.

"Fast!" Shorty Freeman gasped. "I've seen some fast gunnies in my time, gents, but that was the fastest thing I ever run acrost. I didn't even *see* that danged gun ontil Jim had already pole-axed the sheriff."

Jim holstered the weapon, slid to the ground, and caught the huge sheriff who was slewing sidewise. The sheriff was grunting hoarsely, but did not know what was taking place. Jim Donahue disarmed him, pulled him to the ground, and hastily unsaddled the officer's horse.

"Now I'll get you three loose," he rapped at the Flying W hands. He produced a stock knife, ripped their bonds apart, then stepped back, pocketing the knife. "Pile down, gents, an' off saddle," he growled. "I'll leave yuh stranded here with the sheriff."

"What's the idea?" Tom Benson protested. "Us three will string our bets with yuh, honest we will."

"I heard that before," Jim clipped. "But here yuh three were headed for jail. An' Felix Escobedo is loose. Pile off yore horses, boys, afore I take a notion to help you off."

That got action. The three hit the ground with alacrity, and lost no time in stripping gear from their mounts. Jim Donahue stepped aboard his stallion then, and sat for a moment looking somberly down at the three flushed but silent Flying W men.

"I ain't sore at you men," Jim said stiffly. "You failed me, that's certain. But I ain't holdin' a grudge."

"Then why dump us down here with this whiskey-soaked hog?" old Mack snarled. "Jim, I've got my

eyes open now. Last time I seen yuh, yuh was nothin' but a spindly-legged maverick that got the hoss-thief brand burnt onto him. Yuh're still a maverick, son, but about the handiest gent I ever seen with a smoke pole. If yuh'll let me—"

"Thanks," Jim Donahue cut in dryly. "But I'll have to go it alone, boys. They ain't but one course open to me now that Escobedo is loose. I've got to hit an' hit quick—with mighty little chance of livin' to tell about it."

"Hit what?" Shorty Freeman yipped. "If I foller yore meanin'—"

"Hit Poke Jordan's an' his two remainin' side-kicks!" Jim rasped. "Mack, you called me a gun-handy maverick. Mebbe I am handy with hardware, at that. But no matter how good a man gets, there's always some gent just a little better."

He wheeled then and was gone at a gallop, hugging under one arm the guns that had belonged to the Flying W men and the one that had belonged to the sheriff. The Flying W guns had been in a gunny sack, slung across the sheriff's saddle bow. Jim Donahue had dropped the sheriff's weapon into the bag with the others, and was now looking for a place to cache the hardware.

He found the place just after topping out of the canyon, for he was riding along a little ledge. Without dismounting he tossed the sacked guns back into a crevice in the bluff beside him, then rode on, brooding darkly.

Felix Escobedo would, of course, head straight for town and report what had happened.

"Poke will get Dick Prout perculatin' again, an' the three of them will be after my hide," he mused bitterly. "Which means a gun smoke showdown, with me likely on the losin' side."

Jim Donahue topped out onto smoother ground, and found his gaze wandering off towards the south. A curse bubbled in his throat as he realized that he was thinking of the Border.

Five years ago he had turned south from this Sage country when the same set of men framed him as they had framed him this time. He swung his stallion's head sharply about, hard lights dancing in his hot eyes.

"I ain't gonna be spooked outa this country by Poke Jordan again," he rasped. "Drifter, I need some grub under my belt afore I tackle them three sons. Come on, boy. I reckon I've got a right to go to the Flyin' W an' wrassle a meal if I feel like it."

DRIFTER struck a lope, while his master swayed in brooding silence. Once Jim sighted a band of horses skimming across a bald ridge towards higher country. He grinned faintly, for those would be the Flying W horses he had liberated, heading back to their old haunts in the oak-clad, canyon-cut hills.

It would take Poke Jordan some little time to round up those broncs again for a drive to the Border. Or maybe Poke would *never* round them up. The thought was particularly pleasing to Jim Donahue, and he unconsciously let his free right hand drift down to caress the butt of the Colt he wore on that thigh.

"I'll have it out with Poke an' his back-shootin' pards once an' for all," Jim growled, "I'll get me a bit of grub at the ranch, then go hunt them three jaspers."

But that hellish gun showdown was to come much sooner than Jim Donahue guessed. He sighted the ranch after a while, and went galloping on towards it, lost in his own bitter thoughts. Not until he was at the yard gate and starting to dismount did he take full notice of what was around him.

Some subtle something that lay in

the air like an unpleasant odor stirred him out of his thoughts.

Jim Donahue became instantly alert, sniffing as if the thing that had moved him to watchfulness really had been an odor. Then his flashing glance caught and held on the three sweat-plastered horses that stood to his left, tied to the boles of cottonwood trees.

Jim Donahue dropped to the ground—and a bullet cut the air above his head with a vicious, snarling death song. From the kitchen window came a spurt of blue powder smoke, and the voice of a man was lifted in profane complaint over missing.

Those things Jim Donahue heard and saw while his hand executed an up and down motion. His hand landed on Drifter's sleek rump sharply, and the stallion leaped away, snorting uneasily at the unaccustomed roughness of his master. Jim Donahue leaped towards the big square post of the yard gate, a mirthless grin on his wide lips.

Three rifles were belching death at him from the big ranchhouse now. But he was behind the protecting gate post, with nothing worse than a long rent in his left shirt sleeve where a bullet had come dangerously close to crippling him.

He had recognized those three sweaty mounts under the cottonwoods and knew that Poke Jordan, Dick Prout and Felix Escobedo were in the house even before Poke Jordan's profane voice roared out at him.

"Come out from behind that post with your Colt-hooks ticklin' the sky, Jim Donahue!" Poke was shouting hoarsely. "Come out or we'll—"

"Comin'!" Jim yipped—and kept his word. But there was a spitting Colt in each fist, and three voices lifted in consternation as slugs hammered window panes into powdery fragments.

Poke Jordan took a snap shot even as he jerked his ugly head back through the kitchen window. If Poke had not ducked so swiftly, he would have seen Jim Donahue crash forward as if yanked down by an unseen noose.

Jim lay there panting, smoking guns weaving from window to window along the nearest wall of the big ranchhouse. His left leg was a numb and useless thing, and he could feel hot trickles of blood running from his thigh down across his clammy skin.

He hitched himself forward as swiftly as possible, teeth locked against the pain that was coming with the passing bullet shock to nerve and torn muscle. He could move the leg some, and knew that the bone had not been broken. But that leg would not hold him up even if he got to his feet and tried to run.

NOW a shadow seemed to flit before the nearest window. The movement was only a dim blur, yet Jim Donahue's right hand Colt flipped over, roared and bounced. Jim had pulled slightly ahead of the moving blur beyond the window.

At the roar of his gun a gurgling scream lifted from within the house, and there came the dull thud of a body striking the floor. A Winchester streamed fire down at Jim Donahue from almost directly above, and he saw the smoking snout of the gun jiggle as the shooter levered frantically.

Then Jim was at the corner of the house, pulling himself up onto the great porch. He gained his feet, and went reeling along the wall, white and sick from pain. That wound in his thigh was bleeding badly, weakening him. He knew that he had only a few more moments left in which to settle this thing.

One man had gone down in there,

wounded or dead. Which one of the trio it was hardly mattered. There were still two more.

Jim Donahue came to the door, turned the knob, and gave it a hard shove. At the same moment he dropped flat, dived into the room on his belly, and listened to a deadly volley of whining bullets sing over his head. Down the long living room from him stood Felix Escobedo and Poke Jordan, each wielding a pair of six-guns now instead of rifles.

"There! On the floor!" Poke Jordan screamed, and slanted the muzzle of his guns down.

Felix Escobedo had already seen, however, and was sending twin streamers of fire licking towards Jim Donahue's sprawled figure. Jim felt splinters blasted into his face, and felt another slug sear across the side of his jaw. Then his own .45s were bucking in his hands, adding to the din of those other four guns.

Screams, oaths, and the crash of blazing guns lifted all in one nightmarish minute. But even in that din Jim Donahue heard the strident cowboy whoops which came from the yard behind him. He dared not turn, however, for he was busy tossing his lean body from side to side across the floor, making himself as hard to hit as possible.

HE saw the Mexican drop both guns, grab his middle, and stumble blindly into a wall. Then Jordan was weaving, cursing wildly as he clawed at his chest with one hand and kept shooting with the other. But Poke's shots were going wide by inches now, and he crumpled slowly, his face a hideously twisted mask of rage and hate as he fell kicking.

The guns stopped their racket so suddenly that Jim Donahue lay blinking, hardly believing that he was alive. His face was a bloody mask, for a slug had cut a shallow groove above his left eyebrow. But outside of that scratch and the flesh wound in his leg, he seemed all right.

"There, just inside the door. Good gosh, he's—"

Jim Donahue snaked around, hot guns snapping to target. Little Shorty Freeman fell back into the arms of Sheriff Emery Kirk with a yell of horror at the grinning red thing that was Jim Donahue's face,

The sheriff flung Shorty aside, and stormed into the room, old Mack Lacey and Tom Benson at his heels. Shorty charged after them, but stopped beside Jim, eyes bulged out, jaw hanging open.

"Well, yuh shore raised hell here, Jim Donahue!" the big sheriff thundered. "But I've got yuh this time. Drop them guns or I'll put a bullet through yore murderin' heart!"

The sheriff had picked up a gun that had fallen from Poke Jordan's lifeless fingers. Jim Donahue sat up wearily, laid his smoke-blackened guns aside, and crossed his hands in his lap.

"Poke Jordon sent buck Martin. Felix Escobado and Dick Prout up to Buzzard Pass yesterday with orders to mow me down." Jim's voice was calm, tired. "Them three mistook yore deputy for me an' killed him."

"That's a lie!" the sheriff roared. "I sent Ralph Vail out after you, aimed to put yuh under guard so's you couldn't start trouble when yuh showed up here. But yuh killed my deputy an' hid the rifle you done it with. That was slick work, an' yuh got by with it. But this mess here will hang yuh."

"We told the sheriff all the truth, Jim, but he just won't listen," old Mack growled. "He won't believe that us three boys, Shorty, Tom an' me, heard Felix confess all that."

"No, I don't believe it!" The sheriff's voice was a dangerous snarl as

he shuttled towards Jim Donahue. "If yuh kin convince a jury—"

"It's—the—truth!"

The gasping, rattling voice jerked all eyes towards a door which led out into the dining room. There, one blood-smeared hand braced against the door facing for support, stood Dick Prout. The bronc buster's harshly lined face was ashen and blood welled slowly from two neat holes in his leathery neck.

Jim Donahue remembered that shadowy movement behind the window at which he had sent a slug, and realized that that slug had left those two round holes in Dick Prout's long neck.

"I tried to—get Felix an' Buck to—wait until that rider—got close!" Dick Prout panted. "Hell, this Jim Donahue—gun maverick—ain't such a bad—*hombre*. Me an' Poke framed hoss stealin' on to him—five year ago—so his uncle would kick him off the place. Sheriff, I'm tellin' it—plumb straight. Poke Jordan has always stole—Flyin' W stock. He wanted the—the whole spread—"

Dick Prout tried to grin at Jim Donahue, then toppled forward, dead.

The big sheriff was staring uneasily about.

"Jim Donahue," he gulped, "I—reckon that dyin' man's statement clears yuh. I—hope yuh understand my feelin' in this. Yuh see, I—"

"Yuh need a drink!" Jim Donahue rasped. "But first, let me show yuh somethin'. Dick Prout didn't have tuh bother. I was savin' a gent that'll talk an' talk plenty."

Jim Donahue stooped above the huddled form of Felix Escobedo, fastened stout fingers in the Mexican's collar.

Felix cried out shrilly, hands clamped to his middle. But Jim Donahue dragged him mercilessly to his feet, backed him against the wall, and calmly ripped and yanked at the lithe Mexican's clothing until Felix stood nude to the waist. Across Escobedo's middle ran a wicked red gash that dribbled dark blood.

"I FIGGERED I might need some talkin' done," Jim Donahue's voice rasped. "So I burnt this skunk acrost the belly when I caught him standin' right an' was savin' him. But Dick Prout sorta squared up the bad things he had done an' talked, so here's some noose-fodder for you, Sheriff. Or can you stay sober long enough to hang him?"

"I been ornery, son, but nobody has ever justly called me a liar," the huge sheriff said in a choked voice. "An' I'm promisin'— Hey, good gosh!"

Jim Donahue swayed, and would have fallen but for the sheriff's huge arm.

"Quick, Mack, help me get this boy onto the couch yonder," the officer bawled. "Shorty, yuh guard that Mex devil. If this boy is hurt bad—"

"Weak from loss o' blood," old Mack Lacey said with vast relief a few minutes later. "He'll live, all right. An' what a spread this will be now that a real man is behind it. An' he told me that I'd be foreman again, Sheriff."

"It's a good thing that hoss o' mine was gentle enough to be caught without trouble," Shorty Freeman called. "I reckon Jim might have bled to death afore anybody come along if I hadn't caught my pony an' rounded up yuh fellers' mounts."

"Yuh're right, Shorty," the big sheriff called as he helped tighten a bandage about Jim Donahue's punctured leg. "An' gettin' here in time to help save his life makes me figger that I've repaid him a little, anyhow, for the ornery way I treated him."

Next Month's Novel: BIG BEND BUCKAROOS, by Wilton West

Thieves' Honor

With all his remaining strength he raised the weapon and fired

Chuck Dell and Ben Taylor Begin Missing Their Calves, and All Tarnation Explodes as They Whirl into Hell-Bent Battle!

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "Hot Bullets," "Vanishing Beef," etc.

CHUCK DELL and Ben Taylor lay hidden behind a pile of stones on the side of a cliff that looked down into an almost square box canyon high in the jagged hills. They had field glasses glued to their eyes.

"Them's our missin' calves, shore as shootin'," Chuck said. "Blackie Ringo never owned a white-face in his life—that he got honest."

"Maybe our cows wasn't dodgin' the responsibility o' motherhood after all," Ben answered dryly. "Will we go git 'em—or call the sheriff?" He mentioned the sheriff with a sniff of contempt.

"We'll git 'em ourselves. Yuh

seen how much interest the sheriff took in our story."

"Considerin' Blackie an' Stub Willis bein' sorta cousins o' the law," Ben growled, "it ain't hard to understand. An' it's not gonna do us much good if we do git our stuff back. They'll only steal it again—or git the sheriff to arrest us fer stealin' it back—claimin' it's their stuff."

CHUCK put his field glasses in their case. His face was grim, harried. The worry he had undergone trying to get his little spread started, in the face of the opposition of the big ranchers who hemmed him in and the thieves who stole his spring calves, would have stooped the shoulders of a man even less a fighter than he.

"I'm gonna fight 'em with their own weapons," he said determinedly. "Yuh willin' to risk everythin' on stopping this game once fer all?"

"I don't see how—"

"Then listen," Chuck said with sudden determination. "The cards are stacked against us. The big ranchers, at least, don't fight us underhand, so we kin hold our own with them. They're tryin' to starve us on one side. But Blackie Ringo's stealin' the calves. An' I got a pretty good idea that Stub Willis might have more of our stuff over on his spread. He probably helped Blackie an' got a cut fer himself out o' the stuff.

"Now here's my idea: The sheriff won't help us against any one o' the outfits that's against us. My scheme is to do one thing that'll topple down the whole house o' cards that they got us surrounded. Yuh know if you knock one card down in a card house, the rest come tumblin' down on top of it. We're gonna knock down a lot o' card houses all at one time. An' we start by rememberin' that the law won't help us. Yuh ready?"

"Shoot!"

"Then we go down there an' get them dogies if we have to kill every man in that canyon. But we don't take 'em home! Savvy?"

"Gonna leave 'em there—is that what uh're aimin'—"

"No! We're takin' an' drivin' 'em over to Stub Willis' place!"

Ben Taylor looked at his partner blankly.

"How come?" he asked.

""Wait an' see! Let's go."

The pair mounted and rode up the trail to the box canyon. In the concealment of the scrub that covered the hillside on Ringo's land, they loosened rifles in their saddle holsters, and twirled the cylinders of their Colt guns.

Chuck rode into the canyon at an easy lope, followed by Taylor. The natural corral was quiet in the middle of the summer day. Fifty or more white-faced spring calves grazed contentedly. A small rider's cabin nestled against the hillside, a wisp of smoke pouring out of the adobe chimney.

Chuck and Ben rode up to the herd and started rounding it into a tight group. They headed it out toward the canyon neck, working as though they did not expect to see a living soul within a hundred miles.

But the eyes of the pair were constantly on the shack. And as two men suddenly emerged, rifles in hand, the partners recognized them as Blackie Ringo's riders. The punchers circled the shack and threw themselves into the saddles of a pair of mounts. Then, spurring the animals forward, they charged with guns smoking.

The roar of their weapons echoed from the walls of the canyon, mingling with the roar of guns that answered them. Chuck Dell and Taylor, leaning over their horses' necks,

had jerked their rifles out. They guided their mounts straight toward the men from the house. Their spurs dug deep into flanks and the animals dropped their heads and plunged madly forward, while guns roared in their ears.

The two ranchmen charged with a wild madness born of desperation — fury that was calculated to sweep everything before them. That was their only chance. It was necessary that these men should not live to tell what was happening in that canyon.

But they met with resistance that was surprising in its own fury. Head on toward each other the pair of riders spurred—galloping and shooting, like mounted knights that would turn neither to the right nor the left. The fury of the partners' charge would have weakened ordinary opposition, but Ringo's *hombres* came straight toward them, giving shot for shot, volley for volley.

Such a fight couldn't keep up. Chuck's animal went to its knees, spilled its rider to the ground. The mount of one of the defenders turned a flip-flop and threw the man over his head.

The pair on the ground pulled themselves to their feet and continued their way toward each other. The men on horses were at close quarters—and getting closer at every fall of the horses' hoofs.

Taylor dropped his rifle and jerked his six-gun, triggering it as it came from its holster. The defender on the horse threw up his hands, keeled over backward—and fell out of his saddle, dead.

Chuck, on the ground, crouched forward with his own Colt blazing away.

A bullet ploughed through his shoulder—spun him around, threw him to the ground. He rolled over once, his gun gripped tightly to keep from losing it. Death held a high hand over the duel, waiting to declare the winner.

As Chuck rolled over on his face he braced himself, saw the unsteady figure of the man coming toward him.

With all his strength he raised his weapon—it was getting heavy now —and tried to pull the trigger. His strength was oozing out. The trigger spring was too strong—he was too weak.

HE tried again. It seemed an eternity that he jerked, pulled on that trigger—but it resisted his efforts to pull it back. And all the time that figure on the ground was weaving toward him, gun halfway up, ready to plant a single sure leaden slug in him.

Chuck managed to get the other hand on his weapon—the finger of his left hand through the trigger guard on top of the right finger.

Now with the added pressure he again yanked at the trigger.

And two things happened at once. He felt the weapon jump in his hand. Something inside his head exploded with a red blaze—jolted his skull as though a ten-ton boulder had tried to crack his head like a hickory nut. Red fire in flames dissolved to red stars that whirled around—danced before his eyes—grew dimmer—more distant—faded—

He came alive lying across the saddle of his horse like a bag of feed. Taylor was leading his animal and driving the fifty head of calves. Chuck's head ached; his face was caked with blood. He wanted to sleep forever.

But he mustered what strength he could, and by sheer pressure of will he managed to right himself in his saddle just as Taylor discovered his movement. He weaved in his seat, but he could hold himself up.

"Yuh jest about spent the whole

afternoon sleepin'," Taylor grinned at him. "But, boy, yuh deserves it. Yuh shore got that *hombre* square jest as he creased yore scalp an' parted yore hair."

Chuck Dell looked around.

"We're already on Stub Willis' land, an' if I remember rightly, it ain't more'n a mile to that back corral o' his. It ought to be dark in another hour, an' then we'll drive the stuff in there an' git for home. The fireworks ought to start purty *pronto*—if them cousins acts like most kinfolks do—which I'm dependin' on."

CHUCK was sleeping in the adobe house on the ranch he was trying to get started against odds that had continuously piled up against him: the big ranchers, the sheriff, and the thieves who stole his calves as regularly as they were born.

His head was bandaged and his body weak from loss of blood.

Ben Taylor punched him.

"Wake up, Chuck!" he said with suppressed excitement. "We're havin' visitors."

Chuck pulled his aching body out of the bed and looked at the clock. He had been unconscious for part of the night and most of the following day. He went to the door and looked out.

A posse of half a dozen men was galloping toward the house from the main road. They were within a quarter of a mile of the house now and he could see the butts of rifles sticking out of saddle flaps. The men were bristling with guns.

He recognized the leader, a massive man who wore a stiff-brim Stetson ranger hat, and rode a high-stepping black. He was the manager of the Box Bar Cattle Company, the big spread that had so resented Chuck's homesteading the section that cut off their direct drive to the shipping pens in the town twenty miles away.

"Boy, yuh tried to stir things up," Taylor said pessimistically. "Looks like yuh're gittin' yore wish."

Chuck slipped into dungarees and boots and had his guns on his hips when the men clattered up and piled off their horses. There were a dozen guns bristling from the hips of the men—and half a dozen rifles on their horses. The big leader of the posse came up to the front door and shouted hello.

Chuck hitched up the holsters on his hips and stepped out. Ben Taylor flanked him.

"What kin we do fer yuh?" Chuck asked evenly.

The riders were fanned out back of the manager, who did the speaking.

The man eyed the partners carefully for a moment.

"There's trouble back in the hills," he said with slow thoughtfulness. "It seems that them families—Ringo's bunch and Stub Willis' bunch, got to accusin' each other o' stealin' calves from each other. One of 'em found some o' his missin' stuff in the other one's corral an' he started right in a-gunnin'. They been fightin' ever since last night an' there's already about a dozen of 'em killed on each side."

"That's shore tough," Chuck said with a straight face. "An' them cousins, too. Reg'lar family feud."

"That ain't the point," the posse leader said.

Chuck's nerves went taut; his hands hung loosely near his weapons. Ben Taylor edged easily over to his side.

"The point is," the leader continued, "that when they got to fightin', they cut down on everybody that fell into their traps—snipin' 'em from behind rocks on the roads an' trails—figgerin' on shootin' first and seein' who it was afterward. They

got two o' my men an' three men off of other ranches.

"We got a bellyful o' them hyenas that the sheriff won't do nothin' to, so we made up posses off the three ranches that lost men an' went in an'—well, there won't be no more missin' calves."

"That's interestin'," Chuck said with relief. "Still, I don't savvy—"

"Don't savvy my comin' an' tellin' yuh this?" There was a peculiar expression on the manager's face. "Well, I don't either. 'Cept I thought mebbe yuh'd like to know that when we got through with our little job we rounded up all the stuff that's been stolen from us an' drove it over to my place to separate. There's some o' yore whitefaces in the bunch which yuh kin pick up when yuh're feelin' like ridin' again.

"But mebbe it was jest curiosity made me ride over. I been wonderin' jest whether or not them Ringos an' Willis *hombres* was dumb enough to steal stuff from each other that they helped each other steal in the first place.

"Anyway, come over to my place an' git yore calves. An' remind me, I happened to find yore hat, yuh kin pick up, too. Ain't much good no more. Got bullet hole in it an' it's all bloody."

The manager of the cattle company found his eyes straying to the bandage on Chuck's head. He turned swiftly, mounted and rode away, followed by his men.

Chuck Dell and Ben Taylor stood in the doorway looking at them until the trail had swallowed them up.

"Would yuh call that his way o' sayin' 'thanks'?" Taylor pondered.

"Leastwise, I reckon it meant he wouldn't be fightin' us no more," Chuck answered. "An' now I believe I kin sleep better."

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Bad Medicine

The noose floated out through the air and fell true

When Larry O'Neil Finds His Uncle Hogtied in the Brush, He Snaps into Quick Action to Bring a Human Coyote to Justice!

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "Roundup Showdown," "The Death Trap at Devil's Gap," etc.

LARRY O'NEIL'S bald-faced bay pony had dropped down a gulch choked with brush, rocks and fallen timber, and was about to come out to more open country when a flock of magpies took wing at sight of the horse and rider. Instantly the waddy pulled up, shoved back his big white hat, thus revealing clearly his tangled mop of curly brown hair and his unlined brown face, strong with its high cheek bones, slightly hooked nose and fighting chin.

"Where them doggoned scavengers are skulkin' 'round, there's always

something dead or 'bout ready to die," he remarked, as he rolled a thoughtful cigarette, and eyed the magpies.

He swung out of the saddle and began to prowl the brush near at hand.

Soon he came upon the prone figure of a man cruelly bound with wire. The fellow was old, wizened, bald; his bruised and swollen head and his rugged face were streaked with blood. Yet Larry recognized him.

"Why, it's Uncle Bill! What on earth happened?" he gasped.

There was no use asking Uncle Bill O'Neil anything as yet. Larry untwisted the cruel wires, brought water in his big hat and bathed the man's face and head, tried to force a few sips between tightly clenched teeth.

The cowpuncher hadn't seen his uncle in ten long years. He had been busy roaming the wide ranges, taking jobs with different outfits, having the time of his life. However, just last week Larry had received a letter from Uncle Bill, which had read in part:

I'm going to send the missus and the kids back to her old home for a spell. She needs a vacation bad. I'll be all alone and would like for you to visit me if you can, Larry boy.

Fact, less I get an up and coming younker I can depend on I'm going to have to sell this outfit. I wasn't no spring chicken when I found me a nice young woman as'd marry me and now I can't stand the riding no more, while my young uns ain't near big enough to do it for me. Am corresponding with a buyer.

And Larry, cutting across country to find Bill O'Neil's Box N ranch, a lonely place east of the range, had discovered his kind old uncle in this fashion.

The cold water on Uncle Bill's face soon revived him. He stared about him wildly, tried to spring up, but he was far too weak and faint. Eventually in the fading twilight he recognized the grim-lipped young cowboy ministering to him.

"Yuh, Larry? Gosh, I'm glad to see yuh," in a throaty whisper.

"Glad to see yuh, too, Uncle Bill, but not like this. What the heck—"

"Me an' Dixon Enders was fightin' at the house," the old man interrupted. "He got a stick o' stove wood. I seen him rushin' me, swingin' it, an' that's all I can 'member. He must ha' lugged me up yere."

"Sure he must have," clipped Larry "Why were yuh two fightin'? Who's Dixon Enders?"

The old-timer struggled to sit up, sank back.

"He's my hired man," he panted. "We was 'lone. Missus an' little Bill an' little Larry is gone, yuh see? I'd come back from town with the mail middle of the afternoon."

"Is that important?" Larry cut in impatiently.

"Mebbe 'tis," Uncle Bill resumed. "I had a letter from the feller as has been writin' me 'bout the ranch an' cattle. This buyer said he was a-comin' with the cash to buy the outfit, and he'd arrive today. I showed Dixon Enders the letter, an' Dixon up and clumb my frame. Cuss his ornery hide, he's a husky bruiser, still middlin' young, and—doggone! I could ha' downed him oncet, but now I'm kinder slowed up."

LARRY felt a lump rise in his throat.

Yes, his Uncle Bill O'Neil was "kinder slowed up." Any human brute that would do what this Dixon Enders had done to an old man was worse than a savage.

"I'll talk to that dirty cur over the sights of a six-gun," the cowpuncher gritted.

A sudden thought struck the old-timer, and he tried unsuccessfully to spring to his feet.

"Smoky Hills!" he shouted. "That buyer'll be to the place afore now,

and it shore looks like Dixon figgered to rob him—maybe kill him."

"Just what I was thinkin'," snapped Larry. "Yuh take it easy, Uncle. Stay right here an' get back yore strength. I'm foggin' for yore house right now."

"Be all-fired careful, Larry, kid. Dixon's bad medicine. Plumb. He's a hefty, flat-faced *hombre*, kinder yella eyes an' a busted snout, spraddled all over his mug. I dunno why I put up with the cuss so long, 'cept that, isolated like the place is out yere in the hills, it's hard to get a man as'll stay on the job. Dixon shore can do a heap of work, too."

Larry wasn't listening to the last remark. He had tabulated the description of Uncle Bill's hired man, and was now mounted and on his way.

Blaze's steel-shod hoofs cleared rocks and brush as the horse sped out of the gulch. Open country lay ahead, a beautiful little valley hemmed in by the massive mountains on the west and a towering hogback on the east. Not over half a mile distant the waddy sighted a cluster of ranch buildings and corrals.

All this lower country was in shadowless twilight. Darkness was coming on with a rush, which suited Larry. Eager though he was to tangle with Dixon Enders, he realized that the man, if he still was at the ranch, would be most suspicious of any chance horsebacker riding in. Therefore Larry took to a little draw which would conceal him from watchful eyes at the house.

Stars were appearing in the cloudless blue dome of the sky when he left Blaze ground-hitched at a distance from the cluster of buildings, removed his spurs, and stole phantomlike toward his objective.

Lamplight streaming from kitchen windows of the three-room log dwelling showed that somebody was at home. However, Larry looked in the stable, which contained three horses, and in the tiny, one-room shanty which answered for a bunkhouse, just to make sure there was no one in either, before he approached the main house. Cautiously he reached a window, listened a moment and, hearing no voices, raised his head to peer inside.

INSIDE, a very tall man was frying meat and boiling coffee on the neat-as-a-pin kitchen stove. The scrubbed and clean appearance of this kitchen offered a striking contrast to the individual occupying it.

His rough garb was filthy. So was the red-nosed, black-eyed man himself. If he had ever washed his neck or combed his stringy black hair or beard, there was no evidence of it now.

He wore a big Colt .45 hung low on his right thigh.

"Well," thought Larry, "it's a cinch that geezer ain't Mister Dixon Enders. He must be the buyer. Humph! Looks plenty ornery hisself."

He studied the man for a moment longer, then retreated soundlessly for a few rods. Turning, he walked back toward the door, now making plenty of noise.

"Hello, the house!" he called.

Immediately the door was flung open, the lanky, black-whiskered man standing in plain sight.

"Hello, yourself. Come on in." It was a high, shrill voice.

Larry entered the lane of lamplight, advancing slowly.

"Bill O'Neil live here?" he asked.

"Bill O'Neil? He did live here, yep. But I bought this layout from Bill t'day an' he drug it fer parts elsewhere. Whar's yore hoss, cowboy?"

"Yuh bought this layout from Bill today?"

"Yep. Come in. Yuh'll put on the nosebag with me, stop all night?"

Thoughts hammering in his mind, Larry stepped through the door.

"I'm Ralph Conditt," the tall fellow was going on. "I 'rived by hossback t'day 'bout five. Didn't take no time fer me and Bill tuh close up the deal."

"Didn't, eh?" said Larry in a brittle tone. Then: "My name's Larry O'Neil and I'm old Bill's nephew."

"That so? Glad tuh know yuh, Larry. Bill allowed yuh might drift in 'most anytime. Sed to tell yuh he had sold out and everything was hunky dory."

"Listen, my uncle never said a word to you," snapped Larry. "Why not? Because he was knocked cold and tied with baling wire. A cur that'd tie a man with such stuff ought to be left to rot in a bear trap. Uncle was packed up into a gulch and left to make magpie feed. Yuh've bought somethin' from a crook as didn't own it, so yuh'll be out yore money."

As all this tumbled from Larry's lips in one breath, the tall, bewhiskered man gaped at him as if he was completely dumbfounded.

"How much did yuh pay the sidewinder?" demanded the cowboy.

"'Leven thousand bucks! Great goshikers! If I has bought a ranch an' cattle from a jigger as didn't own 'em, that jigger has gypped me proper."

"I'll say he has! Which way'd he head out? We're wastin' time. Got to get him."

"So we has—if yuh're talkin' straight, puncher." Conditt stood as though he had taken root, black eyes staring fixedly at young Larry. In the floor directly under his feet was a trap-door which undoubtedly led to a hole such as ranchers often use for a cellar. But the waddy didn't notice it.

"'Course I'm talkin' straight," Larry flashed. "Yuh be saddlin' up. I'll get my hoss."

Turning, he stepped to the door, mechanically noticing that a blue jumper, a pair of large overalls and a battered hat hung on a nail in the door itself. Probably Uncle Bill's choring clothes. As Larry's hand gripped the knob a shrill, metallic voice, filled with threat, stopped him:

"STEADY! Hold it! If yuh reach fer yore iron yuh're a dead cowpuncher. Lift 'em!"

Larry felt a prickly sensation on scalp and neck as he froze in his tracks. On the wall, he could see the shadow of a big six-shooter held by Conditt and aimed at his head. Slowly he lifted his arms, and slowly turned to face the tall man whose eyes burned with a sort of gloating triumph.

"Yuh gone plumb locoed?" Larry inquired, hotly.

"Not so yuh'd notice it, cowhand. Step agin the wall. Face it. Grab ceilin'!"

Larry gazed at the steady Colt .45 with its hammer drawn back to full cock, and even though he felt a white-hot rage he obeyed the order. Stepping cautiously behind his captive, Conditt plucked his gun from its holster, felt his body expertly for hideout weapons. "I figger yuh was tellin' me the truth, all right enough," he remarked, with a grim chuckle. "But—"

"I'm figgerin' to yank your greasy whiskers out by the roots if I get half a chance," gritted Larry. "Go on, yuh rattlesnake. What do yuh aim to do?"

"Easy on the names, or I'll blow yore head loose from yore neck. Listen. I'm figgerin' to force yore ol' uncle to sign his correct signature to a deed fer the ranch; likewise to a bill o' sale for the cattle and hosses."

"Yuh aim to get this ranch and

stock anyhow?" Larry bit off his words.

"Yep. Now, cowboy, yuh'll walk ahead o' me, mighty, mighty careful, to whar yore uncle's at. Can't fool me neither. I seen yuh for jus' a second when yuh come outa that gulch. Hol' still 'til I snub yore hands behint yore back."

The fuming cowboy thought he'd get a break while Conditt was tying his wrists, but the man took no chances with a supple young rider as quick and savage as this one.

Soon the half-mile walk across the valley to the gulch began. Ralph Conditt, carrying a ready gun in one hand, a lantern—not yet lighted—in the other, forced Larry to go ahead of him. The cowboy knew his Uncle Bill had no weapon, and he reasoned that if he shouted to warn his uncle of what was in the wind it would just make matters worse. So Larry said no word.

Bill O'Neil called when he heard footsteps approaching.

"Friends comin'," Conditt replied.

It was so dark he had to locate the old-timer by his voice. When he did so, Conditt shoved the lantern into Bill's hands.

"Here's matches, Mister O'Neil. Light that contraption," he said.

A moment later the lantern threw yellow light about the immediate vicinity. In its weird light Conditt faced old Bill O'Neil and coolly told him what he must do to save young Larry from being murdered right before his eyes.

"Uncle, yuh tell the snake where he can go," Larry gritted.

"Yuh'll let Larry ride out if I do like yuh say?" old Bill demanded of Conditt.

"Shore," Conditt replied.

Larry knew the man lied. However, Uncle Bill wasn't going to see his nephew shot if he could help it. He filled out and signed the papers as directed. Meanwhile he was getting a sketchy account from Conditt of how Dixon Enders had put over the sale and hit the breeze.

"Here yuh are, yuh thief," quavered old Bill. "I never thunk I'd be driv' to doin' nothin' like this. S'pose yuh'll shoot me. But yuh let Larry ramble."

"Ye-ah, that'll be the fust thing I'll do," sneered the bewhiskered crook sarcastically. Pocketing deed and bill of sale, Conditt went on: "I'm a tough nut who does his own killin'."

"Yuh're a pizen-mean-lookin' skunk all right," replied old Bill. "If I was the man I oncet was, I'd take yuh apart. But atter what took place earlier t'day I ain't yet been able to get up onto my pins."

LARRY, by choice, had been sitting for the past few minutes, menaced by Conditt's ready gun. He was attempting to saw the cord on his wrists against a rock that wasn't any too sharp.

Conditt now backed off a few feet.

"Old-timer and cowboy, it might int'rest yuh to know I been a bandit most of my life," he pridefully announced. "I decided to get to a country whar I wasn't knowed an' settle down. The Box N suits me hunky dory.

"'Nother thing," and the man looked absolutely devilish there in the flickering yellow lantern light as he grinned mirthlessly: "I figgered all the time to kill an' rob the owner o' the spread after I got the papers to it all jake."

"Oh, yuh did?" gritted Larry. "Then why didn't yuh murder Dixon Enders, 'stead of lettin' him flag his kite with yore cash?"

Conditt laughed sardonically.

"Dixon never flagged his kite with my cash! Now 'course," he went on, "I thunk that big walloper with the flattened snout was Bill O'Neil, but while I was buyin' the outfit an' pay-

in' him I had a hunch he was intendin' tuh rob me o' all the jack I had. Consid'able more'n eleven thousand berries, fellers, consid'able more. Well I beat him to it—the holdup."

"Man," gasped Larry, completely astounded, "yuh talkin' straight? What'd yuh do with Dixon?"

"Not that it cuts no ice with yuh, cowboy, but I hogtied that jasper an' heaved him into the hole what's under the floor o' the shack; a hole that Bill O'Neil used to store taters and other vegetables in. Might as well tell yuh I figgered to load him on a hoss and take him back up in the hills some place, come daybreak. I'd ha' took him at night if I'd just knowed my way 'round."

Ralph Conditt's hairy lips were drawn back in an animal-like snarl from his snag teeth. The man's black eyes, seen in lantern light, glittered like those of a snake. He was twiddling with his six-shooter, baiting helpless Bill O'Neil, playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse.

"Well, the palaverin's over," he concluded. "Set up, old man O'Neil, so I can drill yuh square atween the eyes."

Larry's pulses hammered. The muscles on his arms and shoulders stood out like knots as he strained at the cord on his wrists. Would that cord break? Apparently not. Apparently the sawing he had been giving it against the blunt rock had failed. In another second Uncle Bill's life would be mercilessly snuffed out, and so, too, would young Larry's.

However, just at this critical moment came a totally unexpected interruption.

Out of the darkness directly behind Ralph Conditt rang a cold, harsh, deadly command:

"Drop yore hogleg. I got the drop on yuh!"

Conditt, crouched slightly forward, seemed to freeze in that position. His hand opened, and his Colt hit ground with a soft plunk.

"That-a-stuff," snarled the voice out of the darkness. "Now unbuckle yore belt with yore left hand an' let 'er slide."

"Why, it's—it's Dixon!" old Bill O'Neil suddenly shouted. "I'll be darned!"

CONDITT had loosened his belt, which slipped down his legs to the earth. Never before had young Larry seen such a baffled expression on any human being's face.

Stepping around Conditt, and entering the lighted area came a heavy-bodied, flat-faced man with a broken nose—Dixon Enders. In his hand was a Colt .45. Larry instantly noted that this was his own weapon, taken away from him by Conditt at the ranchhouse.

"I busted myself loose, an' busted outa that hole under the floor, too, Conditt," rasped Enders, leering triumphantly at the baffled outlaw.

Conditt's Adam's apple ran up and down his long dirty neck, but he said nothing.

"An' now I'm forkin' the winnin' hoss, huh?" Dixon resumed exultantly. "Got yuh whar the hair's short, yuh danged tough cookie."

"I ain't the crawfishin' kind," snarled Conditt. "Cut loose and be danged to yuh!"

They glared at each other for a moment. Larry was still working away at sawing the cord against the blunt rock.

"Yore nerve pleases me heaps," spoke Enders. "Honest tuh gawsh, Conditt, I never re'lized yuh was a real crook when I was dealin' with yuh. I does now, an' such bein' the case I'm minded to offer yuh a propersition."

"Mention it," growled the black-bearded individual. "I been a boss

o' bandits in my time. Ain't nawthin' in the line o' robbin' banks, trains, stages I ain't wised up on."

"So I re'lize," returned Enders. "Me, I always had the hankerin' tuh be a honest-to-gosh outlaw, but I'm plenty green at the game. Conditt, was yuh and me tuh team up we could shore rake in plenty o' jack, huh?"

"That yore proposition?"

"Yuh swar not to doublecross me, Conditt, an' I'll throw in with yuh. Kinda admire the way yuh handled me. Likewise I got to admire the way yuh was handlin' ol' Bill and this cowpoke. Yuh'll shoot square with me, bandit?"

"Yep!" clipped Conditt. "This admiration is kinder mutual. Yuh got loose, got outa that hole, stuck me up—yep, I'll play with yuh, Enders. We're birds of a feather."

"Pick up yore hardware, Conditt," said Enders, grinning. "This is a humdingin' partnership. Yuh got the deed to the Box N an' the bill o' sale fer the dogies. Now we'll jus' blow out Bill O'Neil's brains an' his nephew's and—"

Conditt was buckling on his belt once again. Dixon had turned toward Uncle Bill, thus taking his eyes from Larry for a second. In this second Conditt did not have a Colt in his fist, and young Larry went into action as swiftly and savagely as a panther.

A LUNGE and he was on his feet. A leap—and his boot toe connected with the lantern. Shattered glass. Pitch darkness. Larry, still with tied hands, pivoted, and again his foot lashed out. He thought he had Enders accurately located; that he could kick the man's gun wrist and knock the weapon from his hand. But Larry's swinging boot missed the mark entirely, and he spun on one heel, all but falling.

"Whar is he? Whar is he?" Conditt was yammering in the inky blackness.

"Whar are yuh, Conditt?" roared Enders. "I da'sen't shoot fer fear o' droppin' yuh."

"Here I am. Right beside yuh, Enders. Now whar'd the blasted ranny go?"

"Down the gulch. I hear 'im!"

At last stabs of flame licked through the night. *Wham! Crash!* Guns barked as the two toughs fired a fusillade of shots at a noise in the brush. The deafening roar died away, and their voices sounded once again.

"Did we drop 'im? Le's see. Danged cowboy didn't have no gun. Hands was still tied, too."

Together the men leaped forward, forgetting old Bill O'Neil in their eagerness to find young Larry. The waddy rose from behind a little clump of bushes to scoot silently to the spot where the old-timer lay.

"Uncle, it's me," he whispered tensely. "Quick, Uncle— Untie my hands."

With trembling fingers Uncle Bill began to work at the stubborn knots. Down the gulch only a few rods away the two killers stumbled over rocks and brush seeking their quarry. A rabbit, or possibly only a mouse, rustled leaves near them and they fired at the sound.

"I got to reload," growled Enders.

"We had everything all sewed up—in the bag," Conditt complained. "But if that double-blasted ranny gets away we'll soon be cottonwood fruit—'less we high-tail fast."

"Should ha' kilt him fust, talked to yuh second," snarled Enders. "Let's plug ol' Bill."

Sticking close together, the two men, enemies only ten minutes ago but now allies, came plowing back to find Bill O'Neil. But the feeble old-timer was not there. They thought they must have mistaken the

exact spot in the darkness. But soon one of them stumbled over the smashed lantern, and the other lighted matches. The lantern was now useless and the matches flickered out in a moment.

"The puncher's outfoxed us an' packed Bill off some place!" Conditt yowled. "That, or else ol' Bill was able to get up on his legs and—"

"Listen," Enders cut in. "Don't I hear 'em—one of 'em anyhow—leggin' it down country?"

"Yep! I hear boots poundin' the ground!" shrilled Conditt. "Come on! Gotta get that puncher afore he can set us afoot—or get a smoke-pole hisself."

"He can't get no lead-chucker," Enders yelled. "I glommed onto the only one I could find."

Conditt was already racing down the gulch. In the intense darkness he tripped over a rock and pitched forward headlong. Hearing the noise of this spill, Enders stopped and demanded to know if the cowboy was responsible.

"Naw!" snarled Conditt, scrambling to his feet and ripping out a chagrined oath. "I skinned my nose fierce. Careful o' these danged rocks and brush, Enders. But rattle your hocks. We shore gotta—"

THE two crooks ran as they never had run in all their lives. Yet, above their own wheezy panting, they heard the sound of horses' hoofs on the plank floor of the ranch stable while they were yet fifty yards away from it.

Out of breath, Enders and Conditt sprinted desperately while the drumming thunder of hoofs going away into the night mocked them. Conditt fired a couple of random shots in the general direction of the racing horses which he could not even see.

Reaching the stable, the two chagrinned crooks stopped. Dixon Enders lighted three matches before he could hold one steady enough to light a lantern which always hung on a harness peg.

"Empty! Stable's empty!" gasped Conditt then.

"Empty!" Enders repeated in a hollow tone. "They was three hosses. Danged cowboy got 'em all."

Dripping perspiration, gasping for breath, they gaped at each other there in the lantern light, baffled, desperate expression on their hard faces.

Conditt voiced what they were both thinking:

"We're afoot, Enders. Afoot! An' Larry O'Neil'll have cowpunchers or the law atter us in scarce no time."

"Gotta take to the hills like we is; no hosses," gritted Enders. "Let's git some grub tuh take 'long, though."

He picked up the lantern. They both started across the yard toward the house, and abruptly a saddled horse, with a figure in the saddle, flashed around the corner of the stable. This horse shot past the two men, speeding onward, but not for far.

Two six-shooters had cleared leather and the night was split wide open with their crashing as stabs of fire licked from their muzzles.

"Down 'im!" Conditt was yelling. "It's the puncher, 'course. Shoot his bronc!"

Enders could not hear the other's voice above the deafening roar of the flaming guns. But, like Conditt, he thought it must be Larry on that horse, and like Conditt, he emptied his weapon.

An exultant shout rose from both men at once. The horse was staggering, reeling, stumbling along. It was down on its side, thrashing about wildly. Enders held the lantern, which was still alight. Together the toughs leaped toward the

fallen animal. As they ran shoulder to shoulder, a second horse tornadoed around the corner of the barn.

Enders and Conditt had heard it, whirled, jerked up their Colts, tugged at the triggers—and the gun hammers dropped on empty shells, clicking hollowly.

There was a rider on the back of the second horse, and there was a rope in this rider's hands. The noose circled his head, floated out through the air and fell true around the bodies of both men. Traveling like a streak of light the horse, Blaze, zipped past Enders and Conditt.

SNAP and hum of a suddenly tightening rope. A yell of terror and a *thump, thump,* as the two scoundrels were jerked high into the air, then smacked against the ground and hurtled along at the end of thirty feet of rope. This rope was dallied around young Larry's saddle-horn, with his bay pony speeding like the wind.

After a hundred yards Larry whirled his horse, loped back to where Enders and Conditt were piled up in a dark heap on the earth. The lantern had been lost, and so had the men's guns. Larry jumped off and deftly wound the lariat around and around the two crooks, who were much too woozy and be-draggled to fight.

Then the puncher stood back.

"Guess that'll hold yuh pizen mean killers 'til I can go get Uncle Bill and later the sheriff," he remarked breathlessly.

"Is that yuh, cowboy?" gulped Conditt after a moment. "It shore is!" There was amazement in his shrill voice. "Yet it can't be. Can't be! We jus' emptied our smokers into yuh and yore hoss. Dropped the hoss; must ha' hit yuh four-five times anyhow."

"Jest what I was thinkin' about," wheezed Enders. "Bill O'Neil couldn't ha' got here to the ranch as quick as we did. So the rider on that fust hoss must ha' been Bill's nephew. Yet— No savvy."

"It'll come to yuh smart jaspers pretty soon," said Larry, grinning for the first time in hours. "Bare-handed, I couldn't go up against yore guns with a show on earth o' winnin'. It was up to me to cook up some bad medicine for crooks in a hurry. I had to figure some way to get you both to empty your hog-legs afore I tore into yuh."

"Huh? Huh?" ejaculated Enders. "Yuh figgered to get us to empty our lead-chuckers? We done it. But we shore kilt somebody. Who?"

"I had to prod myself faster'n a steer in a stampede," returned Larry. "But I knew right where to lay hands on a pair of overalls, jumper and a hat. A few sticks and strings, with plenty of hay for stuffin', fixed them duds into somethin' that'd pass for a rider, dark as 'twas.

"Fellers, I sent two hosses racin' away. The third, as was in the stable, I had out back a-tyin' that figure to the saddle when yuh 'rived. My own Blaze hoss was right beside me too, for I'd got it fust thing. Yuh tough nuts bullet-riddled a dummy!"

Thrill to Hard-Fightin', Hard-Ridin' Rangeland Hombres in Wilton West's Hell-for-Leather Novel of Desperate Gun Battles—BIG BEND BUCKAROOS—in Next Month's THRILLING WESTERN

Law *in the* Holster

A Complete Novelette of Cowtown Courage

By

CHUCK MARTIN

Author of "Water Rights," etc.

CHAPTER I

A Slaying

OLD JIM HASTINGS left his seat on the saddler's bench in Jerry Sullivan's blacksmith shop; landed on the balls of his feet when three shots shattered the morning stillness of the little cattle town of Roundup. His fist hovered above the worn butt of the old single action gun on his leg while his head craned forward to listen, and the burly blacksmith untied his leather apron and reached for the gunbelt hanging near the glowing forge.

"Them shots came from th' Stag Saloon, Jim," he said in a husky, quiet voice. "An' I seen One-shot Lamb an' Buffalo Bodie ride in not more than an hour ago. Let's go!"

Jim Hastings, the old marshal, was already through the double doors. His grey mustaches twitched at the corners as he stalked toward the saloon. His faded blue eyes glowed with the determination to carry the law in his holster as he reached the swinging batwings and shouldered through, with the blacksmith close at his heels. His hand started to draw his gun when he saw the little knot of men at the bar; stopped suddenly when a raucous voice cut through the powder smoke in the long saloon.

"Elevate 'em, yuh ole wolf. I been expectin' yuh tuh horn in!"

Young Hardy's Six-Guns Talk Turkey to

The knife crashed to splinters in mid-air

Jerry Sullivan raised his hands shoulder-high as he stared into the muzzle of a long .45. One-shot Lamb was behind that six-gun, and Lamb was the leader of an outlaw pack that had never been brought to trial. A young cowboy was lying on the floor with a pool of blood spreading under his head, and the old marshal knew that young Sam Tully would never ride the Chisholm trail again.

"You kill young Sam?" the marshal asked in a whisper.

Buffalo Bodie laughed loudly. "I did, Marshal," he answered harshly. "When I asks a gent tuh drink with me, he either drinks or loses all interest in living!"

"Put up that gun, Bodie," the old marshal said. "I'm th' law yere in Roundup, an' I'm arrestin' yuh for murder."

The big outlaw turned to a grinning Mexican and laughed loudly. "Yuh hear that, Yucca?"

Yucca Torres shrugged his slender shoulders. "We go now, *amigo?*" he suggested.

Buffalo Bodie nodded and ad-

One-Shot Lamb and His Ornery Buzzards!

vanced toward the swinging doors. Old Jim Hastings barred his way without moving; his hand gripping the gun in the holster on his right leg. Buffalo Bodie walked right up to the marshal and jabbed the heavy gun against the officer's heart.

"Unclutch that handle before I buffaloes yuh with my six-gun," he growled savagely. "Me an' Yucca is ridin' outa here!"

He withdrew the heavy gun from the marshal's chest and raised it threateningly. One-shot Lamb watched without speaking. Old Jim took a deep breath; twitched his right shoulder up like a flash to slide his gun from the open holster. The big outlaw slashed viciously with his gun before the marshal's gun had cleared leather.

On his knees in the sawdust, Hastings shook his grey head and completed his draw. Buffalo Bodie shot twice before the marshal could bring the long barrel up, and Jim Hastings was jerked back to fall in a twisting heap against the bar. Buffalo Bodie crouched across the smoking gun and stared at the few riders in the saloon; brought his eyes to a pause on the twitching face of the blacksmith.

"He asked for it," he rasped. "You honin' tuh buy chips in this li'l game of draw?"

The burly blacksmith shook his head slowly. "I can't match yuh with a gun an' you knows it," he said slowly. "Ole Jim was th' law, an' you'll pay dear for this, Bodie. You an' One-shot both!"

The big outlaw laughed loudly. "Buffalo Bodie; that's me," he sneered. "When a gent goes on th' peck an' cuts my sign, I buffaloes him ever' time. C'mon Yucca, an' let's burn th' wind."

"We go to the other saloon, no?" the Mexican suggested. "There ees no law now in Roundup, so what have we to fear, *senores?*"

"Dang iffen you ain't right," the big outlaw agreed. "These cowboys don't seem tuh hanker for none of our medicine, an' if they did I guess we could accommodate 'em. See yuh some more, gents!"

JERRY SULLIVAN drew a deep breath as the two backed out of the Stag and mounted their horses to ride down to the Silver Dollar. One-shot Lamb walked slowly to the side door; mounted his horse and rode away.

The blacksmith walked slowly across the floor and dropped to his knees beside the body of his old friend.

"*Adios*, old pard," he murmured softly. "Yuh lived like a man, an' yuh died like one."

He rose wearily to his feet; turned quickly when a deep voice spoke softly from the door. A tall cowboy was regarding him intently from slitted blue eyes; both brown hands hooked in the gunbelts above slim hips.

"Who did that there killin'?"

"Yuh're a stranger yere in Roundup, but if yuh want tuh know, that there corp is ole Jim Hastings, th' marshal," the blacksmith replied brokenly. "Outlaw by th' name of Buffalo Bodie done gun-whupped him before he cut him down with a pair of slugs!"

"Buffalo Bodie, yuh say? Ain't he one of that outlaw pack what runs under One-shot Lamb?"

"Talk easy, stranger," the blacksmith warned. "They ain't no proof on any of that gang what would stand in court."

"Tuh hell with th' courts," the tall stranger growled. "Ole Jim carried th' law in his holster, an' he never backed down for no *hombre* in his life. I'm taken up for him in case any of you gents is interested!"

The few cowboys along the bar averted their eyes as he scanned

each face briefly. Not more than twenty-two, but there was an air of confidence about the stranger that stamped him a veteran of the range. Jerry Sullivan stared for a moment before stepping forward with a hopeful plea in his husky voice.

"Yuh knew ole Jim?" he asked. "Yuh're packin' a star in yere tuh help him clean up th' town?"

"I ain't packin' no star," the tall stranger growled savagely. "I don't need no star to take up for th' best dang friend a kid maverick ever had. Th' name is Hastings Hardy, gents. Ole Jim Hastings was my uncle, an' I was named for him. He taught me all I know about cattle-savvy, but he sent me down tuh San Antone when he come up yere to take th' job as marshal."

Jerry Sullivan leaned down and unpinned the five-pointed star from the dead marshal's faded vest. He straightened up and searched the face of Clay Madison who ran the general store; smiled when the old store-keeper nodded. The young stranger watched with smoldering fire in his eyes.

"Roundup needs a marshal now," the blacksmith began. "Yuh done declared yoreself as havin' taken up for ole Jim. Yuh like tuh do it th' law way an' pack th' star he wore th' last seven years?"

The blue eyes widened. "Yuh mean yuh're offerin' me th' job of town marshal?" he asked quickly.

The blacksmith nodded. "Me an' Clay Madison is two of th' committee," he answered. "Charley Carter of th' C bar C is th' third member, an' what me an' Clay does is jake with Charley Carter. What yuh say, Hardy?"

"Pin 'er there an' recite th' piece," the tall cowboy answered quickly. "But I'd git them jiggers nohow."

Jerry Sullivan fastened the star as the cowboy held up his right hand and took the oath of office. Hardy looked down at the face of Jim Hastings and turned away.

"Ole Jim always carried th' law in his holster," he said slowly. "Reckon they ain't no use in me changin' that habit. Where at did you say I could find this Buffalo Bodie?"

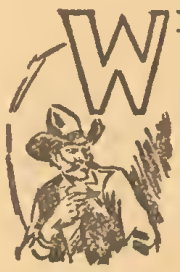
"They went down to th' Silver Dollar," the blacksmith answered. "You want tuh watch that Mex who goes by th' name of Yucca Torres. He comes from th' dagger-an-cactus country down below th' Line, an' he kin cut th' head offen a snake with a throwin' knife."

The new marshal shrugged carelessly. "You said th' Silver Dollar was jest down th' street t'other side?"

Jerry Sullivan nodded. "I'll take care of ole Jim," he promised. "Good luck, Marshal!"

CHAPTER II

Law and Outlaw



WITH the same purposeful tread that had marked the advance of old Jim Hastings, the tall cowboy made his way down the twisting street toward the Silver Dollar. Young Hardy loosened the two six-guns in his holsters just before he slipped through the swinging doors to face the bar, and almost instantly a metal cylinder bored into his spine as a silky voice purred behind him.

"Up the hands, *senor!* Yucca Torres do not speak but one time!"

Hardy sighed and raised his big hands slowly. He half-turned to stare at the Mexican; shrugged his shoulders and turned his eyes back to the bar where a tall, loose-jointed man was telling a story to the saddle tramps who crowded about him.

"So I tells this cow-nurse to name his pizen, an' he refuses tuh drink

free licker. Stead of that he went fer his iron, an' I had tuh smoke him down in self defense!"

The Mexican interrupted the story when Buffalo Bodie paused for breath.

"*Hola, amigo!* Here ees one who wears the star!"

The big outlaw turned quickly as his hand went down to his gun. He grinned when he observed Hardy staring at him with hands held shoulder-high. Moving slowly down the bar, he stopped a few feet away to leer at the new marshal.

"Looks like th' law," he remarked to the Mexican. "That tin badge on his vest says 'Town Marshal.' Stranger, too!"

"Thees one ees Hardy," the Mexican explained. "I have seen heem down in San Antone. Eees ver' fast, *amigo!*"

"I'LL step back an' draw yuh evens," the cowboy offered eagerly. "Jim Hastings was my uncle, an' I'm th' law in Roundup."

"So yuh taken up for that ole slick-ear what come bargin' in tuh haul me off tuh jail," the big outlaw sneered. "Lift them guns of his, Yucca. With them Colts ridin' his legs he ain't doin' nothin' but coaxin' fer uh hole on Boot Hill."

The muscles in the young cowboy's face twitched with anger as the Mexican stepped up behind him and shucked his guns from the holsters. Buffalo Bodie drew his gun and covered the prisoner; jerked his head toward the bar when the Mexican stepped back with the two guns.

"Yuh're drinkin' whiskey till I tells yuh to stop," the outlaw chuckled. "Belly up to th' bar!"

"Wrong again," Hardy contradicted. "I don't drink with strangers, leastwise with outlaws!"

The hard blue eyes of the new marshal stared into the wolfish face without winking. Buffalo Bodie dug his gun barrel savagely against the rocklike muscles as he twisted his wrist. Hardy did not flinch, and the outlaw stepped back slowly while a grin split his mouth to show broken yellow teeth.

His hand whipped up suddenly in a slashing swipe, and Hardy ducked his head and side-stepped. His left hand grabbed the six-gun while his right fist whistled up from his hip to thud against the outlaw's jutting jaw, and Buffalo Bodie buckled and sagged forward.

The new marshal wheeled like a cat as he reversed the gun in his hand and covered the Mexican. Yucca Torres had stuck the marshal's guns in his sash after holstering his own.

"Hands behind yuh an' turn around before I drill yuh center!" Hardy snapped out.

Yucca Torres stared for a moment; shrugged his slender shoulders and turned as he was bidden. A pair of clicks and he was handcuffed, after which Hardy retrieved his own guns and holstered them. He spoke to the bartender.

"Grab that bucket of water an' slop him down!"

The bartender looked at the dirty water and then obeyed. Buffalo Bodie struggled to a sitting position as he strangled for breath, and Hardy prodded him to his feet with his own gun.

"On yore hind laigs, badman," he growled. "I should have kilt you, but yore due tuh stretch rope for th' murder of th' ole marshal. Git proddy an' I'll buffalo yuh with yore own gun!"

The big outlaw glared for a moment; dropped his shoulders when he saw the handcuffs on the wrists of Yucca Torres.

"Yuh can't make it stick," he sneered at the marshal. "I shot that ole he-bull in self defense!"

Hardy stepped forward and drew

back his arm. "Hit th' street *pronto* onless yuh wants a taste of yore own medicine," he threatened savagely. "You an' me is startin' for th' county seat right off."

The new marshal herded the two men down the street to the little adobe jail across from the blacksmith shop. Buffalo Bodie scowled when Jerry Sullivan came out of his shop to meet them.

"You should have kilt that long-rider, Hardy," the blacksmith said reproachfully. "That court over at Crocket don't amount to much."

A moment later the Mexican was locked in a cell, and young Hardy shoved Buffalo Bodie against a wall where he made him stand with his back to the door while the blacksmith helped him make out papers charging the prisoner with murder. This attended to, Sullivan jerked his head toward a corral in the back of the jail.

"Three hosses in th' pen," he said. "That big grey was Jim's special hoss."

"I'll ride my own hoss," Bodie growled. "He's tied to th' rail in front of th' Silver Dollar!"

"I'll git him," Sullivan volunteered. "It might save trouble with some of them saddle bums!"

Buffalo Bodie turned to face the door as the blacksmith hurried away. "I'll be acquitted," he sneered at the marshal. "An' wait ontil One-shot hears about th' new town marshal."

"Yuh're guilty as hell, an' yuh won't be acquitted," Hardy promised grimly. "As for that long-ridin' boss of yourn, he don't pack th' sand tuh come down out of th' hills an' take a chance like a man. He's a dirty dry-gulchin' snake like th' rest of his breed!"

"Yuh're wrong there," the big outlaw contradicted quietly. "One-shot Lamb is a gent what fights accordin' to th' code, an' he never shoots but one time. Fourteen notches on his right-hand gun; but you won't never meet up with One-shot."

"I'll meet him if I have tuh smoke down ever' member of th' gang tuh git to him," Hardy promised grimly. "It's law agin outlaw, an' you an' that Mex is th' first. Now you git on out there to that hammer-headed roan of yores. It's yore last ride, killer!"

Arriving at Crocket, Hardy turned his prisoner over to the sheriff along with the commitment papers and asked to have the prisoner arraigned. The sheriff, wise in the ways of range politics, smiled when he saw the serious look in the wide blue eyes.

"Yuh're new at this game, son," he said in a low voice as they watched the old judge scan the papers. "Don't take things too serious. Sorry to hear about ole Jim Hastings."

HARDY nodded soberly and continued to watch the judge. Buffalo Bodie was also staring at the judge, and the little old man seemed to draw his head down into the collar of his coat as he averted his eyes and cleared his throat. Several hard-looking men lounged at the back of the little courtroom. All were armed and watchful as they listened to the prisoner plead not guilty.

Hardy was called to the stand where he repeated the story of the killing. Buffalo Bodie was then called and repeated substantially the same story. Old Judge Bowen cleared his throat again as he turned to the young marshal.

"You want to read up th' law a little more, young man," he began judiciously. "This is clearly a case of self-defense, and you haven't enough evidence to hold this man on a murder charge. Jim Hastings was looking for a gun-fight, the way I see it, and he tried to settle this matter with what he called holster

law. In seven years he only brought two men here to the county seat. On the other hand, he shot eight men to death. The prisoner is dismissed!"

Hardy was on his feet with blazing eyes. "Yuh mean tuh say he won't be held fer a jury trial?" he asked.

"I said there was insufficient evidence on which to hold him," the judge repeated sharply. "Court is adjourned!"

The tall marshal watched Buffalo Bodie lounge past with a sneer on his wolfish face. When he attempted to follow the outlaw the old sheriff put out a gnarled hand and restrained him.

"Take it easy," he cautioned. "Them four are long-riders there in th' back, an' th' jedge is scairt tuh death. Ole Jim Hastings had th' right idea—if that tells yuh anything."

CHAPTER III

Law and Justice

HARDY rode slowly out of Crocket. A bobbing dot across the low Texas hills caught his attention, and after a brief look through his old field glasses, he spurred the tall sorrel forward. Now he knew why so many peace officers delivered their prisoners dead. Even the judges were afraid of the outlaw bands.

Buffalo Bodie was riding back to Roundup to join One-shot Lamb, and young Hardy cut to the left and raced the sorrel down a long hill. Buffalo showed no surprise when the young marshal rode out of the brush to block escape.

"Figgered yuh'd catch me up if I loped along easy-like," he admitted brazenly. "Me an' One-shot decided we didn't need no law in Roundup, an' I always finishes what I starts."

"Yore figgerin' was plumb correct," the marshal answered quietly. "I knew yuh was guilty when I took yuh to Crocket to stand trial. Now yuh admit it yoreself, yuh dirty, side-windin' killer!"

When Bodie answered, his voice was a low growl that sounded like the snarl of a timber wolf.

"I didn't hole up an' hide out on yuh because I wanted tuh see yore face when I blowed you apart. Old Jim Hastings arrested me one time an' throwed me in that jail of his. Yuh seen what happened to him, an' yuh're due tuh git th' same. Start reachin' for yore cutter!"

"After you," Hardy drawled carelessly. "Yuh're jest small pertatoes what stands in my way to One-shot Lamb. Yuh don't even count."

"One-shot only takes th' big ones," the outlaw grunted. "There's five men in th' gang what kin shade yuh without half tryin'!"

"Most long-riders dies with their boots on," the marshal murmured. "Yuh won't be no different, Bodie."

"You seen them four fellers in th' back of th' court room," Bodie sneered. "They rode on ahead tuh spring Yucca from that calaboose while I was waitin' for you tuh catch me up. Yucca is on th' loose by now, so I don't see no sense in arguin' any longer."

His shoulder muscles twitched forward to snap his hand down for his gun.

Not until then did young Hardy move. His right hand slapped leather and drew in one swift arc that defied the eye to follow it. A flame leaped from his hip, and Buffalo Bodie jerked back in the saddle before his finger could press trigger.

Buffalo Bodie landed on his shoulders, and the gun flipped from his finger. Hardy slid from the saddle and watched the twitching outlaw

with eyes that did not wink. No expression of regret showed on his face, and he holstered his gun when the long legs straightened out and became still.

"Might be I'm wrong," he muttered softly. "Seems like they's uh heap of difference in these parts between law and justice. Justice is what uh gent gits for doin' certain things, an' law is what they hand out to him in th' courts. It ain't no wonder ole Jim carried th' law in his holster agin' such wolves as these!"

CURIOUS eyes followed him as he rode into Roundup, passed the Silver Dollar and continued on to the jail across from the blacksmith shop. Jerry Sullivan ran out to meet him with a double-barreled shotgun in his hands, and a blood-stained bandage around his head. Hardy swung down from the saddle and ground-hitched the sorrel with trailing reins.

"I know," he said quickly. "Four men rode in an' turned Yucca Torres loose. Glad yuh didn't get killed, Jerry!"

"I was holdin' three of them out yere in front with this ole scattergun," the blacksmith growled in his husky voice. "Th' fourth one took off his boots an' snuck in th' back way, an' th' first thing I knew he buffaloed me over th' skull with his gun. When I come to th' Mex was gone, but I recognized them fellers."

"Was One-shot Lamb here?"

"Him an' Hide-out Talmadge," the blacksmith growled. "An' right now Talmadge is up there in th' Silver Dollar lappin' up booze. Yucca lit for th' hills, an' Clay Madison come down yere an' found me."

"Yuh say this Talmadge is up at th' Silver Dollar?" Hardy asked quietly.

"Don't go up there," the blacksmith warned. "That gent carries a two-shot derringer up his right sleeve. He won't give yuh a show!"

The tall marshal rubbed a sleeve over the worn star on his vest. "He led a jail break, an' I'm th' law in Roundup," he answered quietly. "I'll be seein' yuh, Jerry."

No one noticed his going, and when he reached the back of the Silver Dollar Saloon, he slid from the saddle and tied the sorrel behind a low shed. A twitch of the long-barreled guns to ease them of a riding crimp, and then he was in the card room with his back against the wall. Talmadge was talking to a short rider at the near end of the bar.

Hardy walked through the card room with his eyes fixed on the outlaw. A faro dealer glanced up and saw him; coughed suggestively in a manner that meant a warning in any language.

Talmadge was of average height and slender in build. His eyes were a smoky topaz that blinked rapidly under the yellow glow of the coal-oil lamps. The marshal stared with the unwinking gaze that spoke of steady nerves and a dogged determination. The outlaw wore a heavy .44 tied low on his left leg.

He said: "Yuh lookin' fer some one special, Marshal?"

"Cuttin' sign for a gent what goes by th' handle of Talmadge," Hardy answered. "Th' law speakin'!"

"You must be new hereabouts," Talmadge answered. "That's th' tag I answers to. You must be th' jigger they calls Hardy, from San Antone."

"An' points south an' west," the marshal corrected. "I seen yuh in th' courtroom over at Crocket, an' you was recognized as th' gent what led th' jail-break to free Yucca Torres!"

The outlaw nodded. "That's right," he admitted. "Yuh didn't have nothin' to hold Yucca on, so we turned him loose. Yuh must have took a short cut back from Crocket."

"I met up with Buffalo Bodie,"

Hardy answered quietly. "He told me about you fellers headin' on to break th' jail. Yuh're under arrest!"

"Yuh ought to have yore iron in yore fist when you tell a man he's under arrest!" the outlaw said.

The marshal nodded. "I notice yuh wear yore gun on yore left leg, so don't make th' mistake of shaking that right arm for a hide-out!"

The outlaw's face contorted with anger as he dropped his right arm with a jerk. Hardy slapped down for his gun and dropped the heavy hammer while the barrel was tilting up. Talmadge was jerked sideways into a half-turn as the heavy slug caught him in the shoulder, and the hidden derringer flipped from his palm and thudded against the wall.

Talmadge was still turned with his left leg hidden, but Hardy saw the telltale motion when the left shoulder twitched forward. The outlaw finished the draw with his left hand and threw a shot just as the marshal's gun roared again, and Talmadge fell to the floor with a bullet through his head while his finger sent a slug into the ceiling.

"That's th' difference between Law and Justice," Hardy said.

CHAPTER IV

Spanish Dagger

JERRY SULLIVAN met Hardy as he backed out of the Silver Dollar Clay Madison was with the blacksmith, and the old storekeeper was visibly excited.

"I been robbed, Hardy," he shouted. "Two bandits cleaned me of a week's take for makin' you marshal of Roundup. One of 'em was One-shot Lamb!"

"Th' other was Yucca Torres," Hardy said quietly. "I caught a glimpse of him goin' in th' Stag just as you an' Jerry come foggin' up. You two stay out front when I go in to *habla* him about his boss!"

Hardy stepped into the Stag Saloon. He caught a glimpse of two men leaving by the rear door, but he jerked his eyes back to the bar where Yucca Torres was drinking with two of his countrymen. The Mexican stopped in the middle of a sentence, and his brown eyes were staring as he watched the tall marshal in the center of the room.

Hardy stared at him with that unwinking gaze Roundup was beginning to recognize and fear. His hands were hooked in the crossed gunbelts around his lean hips, and when he spoke his voice was deep and quiet.

"Yuh're still under arrest, Torres. Jail-breaks don't count with me!"

"Have a care, *senor*," the Mexican warned softly. "One time before you have take me by surprise, but thees time I am watching you."

Yucca Torres stopped his own right hand with a jerk as he stared into the black muzzle in the marshal's hand.

"Yuh said you was watchin' me," Hardy said contemptuously. "Git them flippers up an' keep 'em high!"

Yucca Torres took a step forward. Then he stopped to adjust the heavy *sombrero*, and his right hand went down to scratch the back of his neck as he shrugged. Like the flick of a whip-lash his arm straightened out from the shoulder with a knife sliding from his fingertips like a silver beam.

Hardy did not move except to tighten his finger on the trigger. Red flame belched from the gun at his hip while the sullen roar echoed back from the low ceiling. The knife splintered to pieces in mid-air and showered the drinkers with slivers. Another shot roared on the heels of the first, and the Mexican screamed when the holster fell from his gun belt.

"Do not keel, me *senor,*" he pleaded. "I come to the *carcel* like you have say!"

In the office of the little jail the marshal lighted a lamp, and motioned his prisoner to a chair with a jerk of his head. The blacksmith came inside and shut the door.

Hardy leaned against the wall and spoke sharply to the Mexican.

"What'd yore boss have tuh say?"

The Mexican glared sullenly. "One-shot, he tell me to come back an' feenesh the job," he muttered.

"Mebbe he told you that he'd finish you if yuh didn't," Hardy suggested. "I've heard tell that One-shot Lamb don't have much time for a man who falls down on a job."

"He weel keel me," the Mexican moaned. "*Senor* Lamb has promised, an' he never breaks hees word!"

"Where's th' hide-out this *Senor* Lamb uses?" Hardy asked. "I might consider jest runnin' yuh out of town—pervidin' yuh talk."

"Eight miles from here," the Mexican whispered. "Up near the Burro Mountain where the two peaks make the high valley. Eight men are left in the camp, and the *Senor* Lamb have a leetle log house near the cliff!"

A single shot rang out as the Mexican finished speaking, and he screamed like a wounded horse before flopping out of the chair where he landed on the floor with a thud. Hardy was hidden from the cell block by a bend in the wall, and he leaned over the desk and blew out the lamp before Yucca Torres had stopped kicking.

Jerry Sullivan wheeled from the front window with both hammers of his shot-gun cocked. The marshal was crouching toward the cells with both guns in his hands, and he ran to the nearest cell and mounted the bunk to peer out the window as a running horse pounded away in the darkness.

"He shot through that window, whoever it was!" the blacksmith whispered.

Young Hardy reached out his left hand and picked a card from the sill. Walking back to the office he lighted the lamp and stared at the card in his hand.

"Ace of hearts with th' pip shot out," he muttered. "That spell yuh anything, Jerry?"

"One-shot Lamb," the blacksmith answered in a whisper. "He never shoots but one time, an' that's his callin' card. He must have heard th' Mex tellin' you how to git to his hide-out!"

THE tall marshal wheeled like a flash.

"Say! I wonder what become of Clay Madison?"

"He high-tailed it around behind th' Stag when we went in," the blacksmith answered. "I never thought about him till now."

"C'mon," Hardy grunted. "Two gents slipped through that back door when we went in th' front, but I was too busy watchin' Yucca to pay them any mind. We better fog it on back there an' see what Clay is up to."

Hardy stumbled over a body near the back door of the Stag as he ran through the darkness. His gun leaped to his hand as he crouched on the ground, and a soft groan came faintly to his ears. Then he ran forward and knelt beside the body of the old storekeeper.

"Jerry," he called softly. "It's ole Clay, an' he's hurt pretty bad. Give me a hand with him!"

Making as little noise as possible, they carried the old man back to the street and down to the jail office. The blacksmith made a light while Hardy hurried to get water, and Clay Madison was sitting up wanly when he returned with a pitcher. The old man reached out and took the pitcher with both hands; he drank deeply.

"What happened, ol'-timer?" he asked.

"Two gents piled out that back door jest as I was reachin' for th' knob, an' one of 'em hit me uh belt with his gun," the old man groaned. "You git that Yucca *hombre?*"

Hardy jerked his head toward the body of Yucca Torres. The old storekeeper stared at the black hole between the eyes on the Mexican's forehead.

"Th' gent what did that job left this yere card back on the window in Number One cell," Hardy told him. "It was One-shot Lamb."

"We better send word out to Charley Carter on th' C bar C to bring some of his men in tuh town," Madison suggested. "Twice before when that dang outlaw was pressed close, he swooped down an' struck first, an' they's too many saddle bums in town right now to look jest right."

"I hate tuh bother Charley Carter right now," the blacksmith answered slowly. "He's makin' uh big deal for some Mexican cattle he bought cheap, an' he needs ever' man he has."

"How far out is th' C bar C?" Hardy asked. "Might be Carter is needin' some help his ownself."

"Jest a matter of five miles to th' ranchhouse," Jerry Sullivan answered. "Listen—"

CHAPTER V

The Warning

HARDY listened. He ran to the door,

"Hoss comin' hell-fer-leather," he grunted. "He's headin' for here, men!"

"It's Charley Carter himself," the blacksmith muttered. "Turn that light low, Clay!"

Charley Carter reined the tall roan to his haunches and slid from the saddle like a relay rider. He trailed the bridle-reins on the ground as he crouched low and darted inside the office; gasped for breath a moment while his eyes darted to the body of the Mexican and back to read the faces of the three men who were waiting for him to speak.

His grey eyes fell to the playing card on the floor, and he stared at it while his hand went to the pocket of his black chaps and produced a similar card.

"One-shot Lamb is on th' prowl," he said huskily.

"This is Hardy we done made town marshal," Jerry Sullivan said by way of introduction. "Hardy, this yere is Charley Carter what rods th' C bar C spread we was speakin' of."

"Howdy, Marshal," the cattleman muttered. "I heard how you arrested Buffalo Bodie an' Yucca. I got here too late tuh save th' Mex, but he had it comin' nohow."

"You knew that One-shot was goin' tub rub him out?" Sullivan asked.

Charley Carter shrugged his shoulders. He was about forty years old, with the sharp blue eyes noticeable in men who stare into far distances.

"One-shot told me he was comin'," he announced quietly. "It was showdown tonight, fellers, an' I took water. I figgered there would be another time, an' I can't match that gun-swift with th' Colt if I had it in my hand."

"He was out to th' C bar C?" the blacksmith demanded, "an' he give you his callin' card!"

The cattleman nodded soberly. "I was in my office countin' over ten thousand in currency I jest got to pay for them Mex cattle," he explained. "Th' first thing I knowed, he threw that card on th' desk an' told me he come after th' money!"

Clay Madison rubbed the lump on his head. "Yuh done right, Charley,"

he said soothingly. "They ain't but one man in these parts what kin come near to matchin' One-shot for speed, an' he'd have kilt yuh shore!"

"So he took th' money," Sullivan guessed. "That it, Charley?"

"It ain't th' money," the cattleman snapped irritably. "That dang outlaw give us twelve hours to git rid of Hardy, or else each of us gits one of those callin' cards of his. An' you never know when that devil is goin' tuh strike!"

"I'm gittin' up a posse come daylight," the young marshal said soberly.

Charley Carter smiled wanly. "You say anything to any of th' boys about a posse?" he asked.

"Not yet, Hardy admitted. "I only took th' office this mornin' like you knows. Been pretty busy since then."

"Yeah," Carter admitted slowly. "But ole Jim took a posse back toward Burro mountain last year. Rode out with twenty-two men, an' come back with nine of them tied ankle an' wrist across their saddles. One other time he tried to organize another posse an' ever' dang cowboy hit out for home so fast you couldn't see nothin' but dust!"

HARDY stared thoughtfully at the speaker. When he spoke, his voice gritted with contempt.

"You got uh hell of uh lot of law yere in West Texas," he said. "Outlaws tellin' yuh what you kin do an' how yuh got tuh do it. If an officer makes an arrest, th' courts turn th' prisoner loose an' gives th' officer a jackin' up. Then th' outlaws ride in an' pull uh jail-break, sticks up decent citizens, an' kills prisoners right under their eyes.

"I pay more taxes than any man in Roundup," Carter complained. "An' I can't get protection even when I know who th' robbers are what steals my money. If you arrest One-shot Lamb an' took him to Crocket, that dang jedge would turn him loose an' fine me for contempt of court."

"There's still one pretty good law," the young marshal said quietly. "What ole Jim called holster law. If it was good enough for him, it's good enough for me!"

"It's a death-trap any way yuh look at it," Jerry Sullivan said. "We kin save our own skins if we take you out of office, an' likewise save yore's."

"I got th' man what killed ole Jim," Hardy answered him. "Now I'm workin' at th' job of marshal accordin' to th' law. I ain't never quit a job of work yet ontil it was finished!"

"I'll back yuh with ever' cow critter on my range," Carter promised him. "Might as well be dead an' planted as tuh work for a pack of killin' wolves!"

Hardy pulled out a heavy silver watch; glanced at the open face and rose to his feet. The town committee watched while he eased the brace of .45s in the moulded holsters with a little tug of his fingers. He seemed taller than his six feet as he shrugged back his shoulders and spoke softly in his deep voice.

"Eleven thirty, gents. An' onless I miss my guess they's two killers in town waitin' for their needin's. Be seein' yuh!"

Hardy stalked toward the yellow lights of the Stag, with Jerry Sullivan ten paces behind, a shotgun cradled against his hip. And not a man was in the street to challenge their passing.

Suddenly, the marshal flipped open the batwing doors of the Stag.

Two tall men were at the center of the bar buying drinks for a crowd of tipsy saddle-bums, and they stiffened and pushed back away from the bar. The marshal's left hand plucked a playing card from his vest pocket and flipped it into the

air. A roaring flash blasted the silence of the saloon as his right hand flickered down. The card spun under the yellow light and fell at the feet of the two bearded strangers.

They stared at it in stunned silence, and when they looked back at Hardy, the smoking six-gun was snugged back in the low-thonged holster on his thigh.

"It's th' death card," one of the strangers whispered huskily. "Th' Ace of Spades with th' shovel shot out neat!"

"Fan out, Cole Dawson!" one of the pair muttered.

Hardy smiled grimly when Cole Dawson stepped slowly two paces to the left.

The first man was crouching forward with shoulders hunched over his elbows, fingers taloned over the butts of his walnut-handled guns. The marshal's voice held both men poised.

"You pulled a jail-break," he gritted. "That's gonna bring yuh jest about twenty years in the big stone house!"

"Prove it!" Cole Dawson growled the word savagely. "After that play you pulled over Crocket way, looks like yuh'd git some savvy!"

"Then yuh went over to th' Silver Dollar tuh celebrate while One-shot was pullin' a raid on th' C bar C," Hardy continued. "I seen you dog it when I come in th' front door to git Yucca Torres!"

"An' Yucca took hisself a long trip," Dawson sneered. "She's yore play, an' One-shot done sent you warnin'!"

"I'm callin'," the marshal said softly. "Either yuh surrender right *pronto*, or else you git a dose of holster law!"

Cole Dawson glared with hate-rimmed eyes as he balanced on the balls of his feet. Dawson was known to be fast; carried eight notches on the grip of his right-hand gun. The other, Jesse Clanton, carried six. Hardy was fast too, but the odds were too long to rate him an even chance to be on his feet when the smoke cleared away.

"You'll git one of us, but th' other one will smoke yuh down," Cole Dawson said. "She's a stack-up, an' it's too late for you tuh pull back yore bet!"

"COURT'S open an' th' jury finds yuh guilty," Hardy grated, and his eyes held an unwinking stare.

The two men slapped down without warning. Hardy drew both guns, dropped the heavy hammers with one smooth movement. Yellow flame spat from his lean hips while the sound of slapping palms was still in the air; flame snuffed out by the double explosions which rocked him back on his heels when the heavy six-guns bucked in his calloused hands.

Cole Dawson coughed and crashed forward on his face before his gun had cleared the lip of the scabbard. Jesse Clanton staggered back as the heavy slug broke his right arm; jerked himself into a pivot as his left arm swung in an arc. Another roar of thunder as Hardy squeezed the trigger of his right-hand gun, and the weapon slipped from Clanton's fingers as he swayed like a tree in the wind.

"Th' law has come to Roundup tuh stay, gents," Hardy said quietly. "Th' death car is out agin' all known outlaws, an' somewhere among you short-horns there's uh snake in th' grass what will report to One-shot Lamb. We're goin' to have a li'l holster law yere in Roundup, an' you can tell him I said so. She's midnight, gents, an' tomorrer is a new day. By sundown they won't be uh long-rider in Roundup. Th' law speakin' final!"

CHAPTER VI

The Wrong Card

CHARLEY CARTER listened while Jerry Sullivan told about the fight in the Stag. Then he looked at his watch and held out his hand to the young marshal.

"Midnight," he said briefly. "Guess I'll be ridin' out to th' C bar C. Good luck, Hardy!"

Hardy watched the cattleman ride into the night; turned to stare thoughtfully at the old storekeeper.

"I got a hunch, old Clay," he said finally. "Me an' Jerry had better bed down up at yore store for about forty winks. I got me an idea that next Ace of Hearts will fall there."

"Sho' 'nuff," the blacksmith chimed in eagerly. "An' if it does I might git a chance to unlimber ole Betsy. Can you bed us down, Clay?"

"Plenty of new mattresses with a pile of double blankets on th' shelf," Madison answered. "Though I hardly look for any more ruckus tonight."

"Yuh forget I sent word to One-shot Lamb," the young marshal reminded.

"Well; might be yo're right," the old storekeeper admitted grudgingly. "But it makes me feel like I'm bein' took care of."

Hardy stalked ahead with arms swinging loosely, and he waited at the store until Madison unlocked the heavy doors. Then he and the blacksmith tiptoed in and pulled mattresses from a rack.

"I'll bed down in back as usual," the storekeeper grunted. "Goodnight tuh both of yuh."

"Night," the blacksmith answered, and shucked off his boots.

Hardy grabbed a double blanket and followed suit. False dawn was just showing through a dingy window when he came awake with all his senses alert. His hand reached for his boots. Jerry Sullivan also sat up when a sound came from the front door. Hardy cat-footed behind the mattress rack as he jerked his head toward a heavy cupboard, and Jerry Sullivan took his position with old Betsy cradled against his hip.

The front door opened slowly to admit four shadowy forms. Hardy caught the glint of light on drawn six-guns; pressed back against the wall as the four intruders felt their way between the long aisles. The tall marshal waited until the four had passed him, then:

"Drop them irons before yuh turn around! Yuh're covered!"

All four of the outlaws jerked around. A tall bandit nearest the marshal pressed trigger as he whirled, and he spun into a flip when Hardy triggered his right-hand gun. The darkness was suddenly lighted by a blinding flash followed by a tremendous explosion. The blacksmith had finally unlimbered both barrels of old Betsy at the same time, and two of the outlaws fell to the floor like ripe wheat before a scythe.

The fourth man dropped down and crawled forward to jab his six-gun at the marshal. Hardy leaped aside and dropped the hammer of his left-hand gun when the slug tugged at his vest, and the outlaw loosened his finger with a gurgling sigh as a bullet tore through his throat.

Old Clay Madison stuck his head around the corner from his sleeping room; followed it out with an old Colt in his gnarled fist.

"My Gawd!" he gasped. "Did yuh turn that ole cannon loose, Jerry?"

The marshal held up a warning finger for silence as he hunkered down beside the wounded bandit. An Ace of Hearts was in the fellow's hat-band, but Hardy paid no attention to it as he strained his ears to catch the faint whisper.

"Better let me—go out there—to th' C bar C—with yuh, Chief!" the outlaw muttered vaguely. "Might need—some help"— The murmuring voice died away to silence.

After waiting a moment, Hardy got to his feet and thumbed fresh cartridges into the gates of his Colts.

"Git yore hosses," he said to the men. "One-shot Lamb aims tuh fill out his card on th' C bar C."

HARDY quartered the big grey across the lane through the cottonwoods to block off the horses of Jerry Sullivan and old Clay. Their eyes followed his gaze as they reined to a stop, and in the distance they could see the C bar C riding crew working a herd of Mexican longhorns.

There was nothing unusual in the early morning activities on the big cattle spread, but the young marshal was staring at a tall black thoroughbred tied on the off side of the house where he would not be seen from the mesa pasture.

"Too late," the blacksmith groaned. "That hoss belongs tuh One-shot Lamb, an' he must be in Charley Carter's office. Best we kin do is sieve him full o' holes when he tries a gitaway."

"You stay yere an' cover that hoss," Hardy said. "I'll slip up there to th' office, an' ole Clay comes up later tuh back up my play. Don't make a sound unless yuh want Charley Carter tuh furnish gun-bait for that outlaw's iron!"

He slid from the saddle and eased the two heavy guns on his legs as he started for the house. The porch was only one step high, and he crossed it in two strides. Chest against the mud wall, he listened to the low conversation inside the long office. Charley Carter was talking in a low, strained voice.

"Yuh done got all my money last night. Seems like yuh'd be satisfied, One-shot!"

The big outlaw's voice was dangerously quiet. "Yuh rode to town," he accused the cattleman, "an' notified th' rest of th' committee about my visit. After that you waited at the jail while that hired gun-swift yuh brought in went up to th' Silver Dollar an' pulled a gun-sneak on two of my men. Cole Dawson an' Jesse Clanton was killed last night, an' both of them gents was plumb fast with their cutters."

"I didn't even see th' fight," the cattleman argued.

"You heard about it," the outlaw continued coldly. "So I sent out my callin' cards. Here's yores!"

His left hand flipped out from the pocket of his embroidered vest, and the cattleman stared at the Ace of Hearts on the floor at his feet, with the pip shot out.

"That's a bullet hole," the outlaw said softly. "I never shoots but one time."

Hardy allowed his eye to peer around the frame of the heavy door. It was the marshal's first sight of the famous outlaw who had terrorized west Texas for five long years, and he studied the man carefully while he listened.

One-shot Lamb was an inch over six feet, and would weigh about a hundred and eighty because of his lithe slenderness. Not more than thirty, but his handsome face was marked by that hunted look which all riders of the owl-hoot trail carry as long as they live. His long fingers were well-kept and supple; the hands of a master gunman.

"Old Clay Madison is dead," the outlaw stated. "Jerry Sullivan 'ull receive a card, and after I've done finished with you, I aim tuh call on the new marshal of Roundup. I've heard that he's fast with his tools, but we'll see. I'm waiting, *hombre!*"

"It's murder," the cattleman an-

swered harshly. "I can't begin tuh match yore draw, an' yuh know it."

"That's yore misfortune," the big outlaw said. "At least yuh have a chance to die like a man."

CHAPTER VII

Law in the Holster

THE marshal of Roundup stepped back and drew his six-guns smoothly. Then he sidestepped into the doorway, and his voice held a hard note of authority when he spoke.

"Don't move, One-shot! This time I got both guns in my hands, an' yuh're under arrest. Reach high!"

The outlaw stiffened. He seemed to be listening to a voice in the distance, and then his long-fingered hands raised slowly. He turned to stare at Charley Carter, who reached clumsily for his gun to cover him from the front. Turned squarely to face the marshal as old Clay Madison stepped forward with his Old Colt cocked and ready. Smiled coldly when he saw the two six-guns in the steady hands of Hardy.

"Good mornin', gents," he said quietly. "Seems like I done lost the deal this time. I prefer tuh die like a man, and if yuh'll holster yore irons, I'll draw against th' three of yuh. A gambler's chance—"

"We ain't gamblin'," the old storekeeper said grimly.

"Step up behind him an' draw his fangs," Hardy told Charley Carter.

"In a way I am sorta disappointed," Lamb said, as his guns were lifted from his holsters." I heard that th' new marshal carried th' law in his holster, but it seems like he was afraid to meet me like a man."

"Th' law comes first, One-shot," Hardy said quietly.

The big outlaw did not talk on the way back to Roundup. Men ran from the saloons to stare at the little procession when they swung into the winding street of Roundup, but One-shot Lamb looked straight ahead and rode in silence. Inside the jail Hardy said to the outlaw:

"Yuh needn't count too much on that jedge over Crocket way, I got to attend a funeral this mornin', an' after that you an' me is goin' to Austin. Yuh're a Federal prisoner, Lamb!"

The big outlaw lost his composure for the first time. "I demand to be arraigned in th' county where I was captured," he shouted angrily. "That's th' law."

Hardy shrugged. "Yuh made up th' plan what resulted in th' death of a peace officer," he stated. "Ole Jim carried a U. S. deputy marshal's commission so's he could work outside Roundup, an' that makes you a Federal prisoner."

"Law in th' holster," the outlaw sneered. "Yuh don't pack th' sand to step back for a showdown, but we ain't in Austin yet."

YOUNG HARDY and old Clay Madison rode back from the little cemetery in silence. Charley Carter and Jerry Sullivan had remained at the jail, and the young marshal narrowed his eyes when he saw a horse loping across the back lots behind the jail.

Meanwhile, within the cell of the jail, One-shot Lamb stepped up to the barred window from which Hardy had lately seen a stealthly rider come. A gun had been slipped between the bars; with it, a key. The outlaw took swift possession of both, crossed the cell, and quietly let himself out into the corridor. As he halted at the office door he drawled a smooth command:

"Don't move, gents! Jest raise yore hands careful-like, but don't raise yore voices!"

Charley Carter paled under his tan

and raised his hands. The brawny blacksmith followed suit with a muttered curse, and the outlaw stepped across the office and picked up the old shotgun to place it in a corner.

Then he emptied the cattleman's holster, after which his greenish eyes gleamed when he reached out and reclaimed his own balanced weapons from Charley Carter's belt. He stepped back in an angle of the wall when horses stopped outside.

"One word from you gents and I'll stage a massacre," he warned softly.

Old Clay Madison stepped through the door with the young marshal at his heels. The storekeeper stopped with one boot raised, and his jaw dropped.

Hardy also stopped; hooked his hands in his gunbelts as he stared at One-shot Lamb.

"Stand hitched, Marshal," the outlaw grated. "You, Clay! Unbuckle an' step back. *Pronto!*"

Clay Madison obeyed.

"You been marshal here in Roundup jest twenty-four hours," the outlaw began conversationally. "In that time yuh've rubbed out seven of my men, or had it done. We don't want no law here in Roundup, like I sent yuh word. Here's my card!"

His left hand went to his vest; came away with a flipping motion as a card fluttered to the floor.

Hardy glanced down at it and smiled. It was the Ace of Hearts with the pip shot out.

His own left hand flipped slightly, and the outlaw started when a card fluttered through the air to land between his polished riding boots. The card was the Ace of Spades—with the pip shot out of the center.

"Th' death card," Lamb muttered. "Th' Ace of Spades!"

The four men watched him as he lowered his hand and laid the borrowed weapon on the desk.

Hardy did not move, but his eyes lighted up with an eager fire.

One-shot Lamb hooked both hands in his gunbelts; stared at the young marshal with just a trace of pity in his greenish eyes.

Old Clay Madison leaned forward with eyes staring his unbelief.

"He's callin' fer showdown," he whispered.

"Showdown—yeah," the outlaw said quietly. "I never shoot but one time, an' you gents refused to draw agin me when you was four to one."

"Yuh're a *hombre*," Hardy admitted grudgingly. "I tried tuh deal this ruckus th' law way, but seems like yuh won't have nothin' but holster law. Each of us gits a hand, an' ole Jedge Colt sits on th' bench tuh speak th' verdict. Yuh're guilty as hell, One-shot!"

"Time is each minute as we live it," the outlaw smiled, and there was genuine enjoyment in the tone of his voice.

"Yuh don't have much time left, an' I'm waitin'!"

BOTH men struck down their hands at the same time. One-shot Lamb found the smooth grip and drew, without a pause to mark the stop between the strike of his hand and the up-pull.

Hardy fired from the hip. Both guns roared like one. The outlaw's slug slapped against the holster on the marshal's leg, showing the infinitesimal difference in their speed; low because the glinting barrel had not yet tilted up at the end of the draw.

A crimson dot leaped to the outlaw's breast as the gun dropped from his fingers, and he swayed.

Then he crashed forward, shivered like a stricken oak in a wintry storm.

Hardy holstered his six-gun and walked to the door, where he paused to address the town committee.

"He asked for it," he said simply. "He wouldn't have nothin' else but holster law."

RENEGADE Ranch

A SIX-GUN SANDY ADVENTURE *in* PICTURES

"Reach high, gents!" snarls a gruff voice as a group of masked men enter the Last Chance Saloon. Cursing and scowling, the men at the bar reluctantly raise their hands. As he holds his arms above his head Sheriff Sandy finds that his fingers are close to an oil lamp hanging from the ceiling. "This is a serious play," says the leader of the masked bandits. "So fork over all yore cash, and *pronto!*"

The young sheriff's eyes narrow as his gaze sweeps over the seven bandits. "Looks like they got us where we'll have tuh shell out," Sandy says. Suddenly he pulls down the lamp and throws it!

There is a howl of pain and fright from one of the outlaws as the lamp strikes him. The kerosene spatters over the man. In a moment his shirt is blazing. "I'm burning!" he screams as he rushes madly out of the place. Sandy's hands streak for his guns. *Crack!* One of the bandits go down as the sheriff fires. The other men of the town have joined the battle! The outlaws scramble madly away!

Sandy glimpses an outlaw and pursues swiftly, but soon all the bandits have galloped out of sight in the darkness. Sandy gets his horse—dawn finds him on the trail, ready for action.

[Turn page]

The bandits have managed to evade capture, but Sandy trails them by an odd-shaped hoof mark made by one of their horses. "Headin' west," murmurs Sandy. Suddenly a huge boulder crashes down, just missing him!

Sandy draws his gun as he hears the boom of a heavy Colt and a bullet tears at his sleeve. A figure looms high on the cliff above the sheriff. *Bang!* Sandy fires. The man on the cliff topples and remains very still.

Realizing the man he killed was a lookout left there to get him, Sandy advances cautiously. He discovers a ranch hidden in a box-shaped canyon. "Renegade Ranch," he says, creeping closer. A man stalks behind him!

Sandy hears a faint noise. "Got yuh—" shouts the pursuing bandit. But the sheriff's gun leaps from his holster with lightning speed as he whirls. Two shots echo as one—and the outlaw goes down, his own bullet just missing Sandy. "They musta heard that shootin'," opines the sheriff.

He is right. The four bandits at the ranch-house have heard the shots. "There he is," exclaims the leader. "Up thar by th' hay wagon—burn him down!" Guns roar from doors and windows, but Sandy is too far away for accurate six-gun range. He remains high up on the hill above them.

"Got tuh get them out in the open," murmurs Sandy. An idea strikes him. He sets fire to the dry hay on the haywagon, and then starts pushing. If only he can get the wagon to roll down the hill!

Panting and struggling, Sandy finally gets the wagon to move. It goes faster and faster as it rolls down the hill. A flaming juggernaut! *Crash!* It strikes the ranchhouse, scatters blazing hay!

As the house starts flaming, Sandy comes running down the hill, guns ready. "That's sure some fire," he murmurs as he hears loud crackling. Shouts and curses come from the outlaws inside.

The bandits make a feeble attempt at defense, but the ranchhouse is doomed! Part of the roof falls, barely missing two of the men. "Come out!" orders Sandy. "And with yore hands up!" Covered with grime and badly burnt, the outlaws appear with their hands raised.

Sandy forces one of the men to tie the hands of the others behind them. Then Sandy ties up the fourth man. "We'll be headin' back tuh town now," says the sheriff as he mounts. "An' it's a right long walk. Reckon yuh fellers won't see Renegade Ranch again for a long time!"

Next Month: SIX-GUN SANDY in GALLOPING DEATH

Major Trouble

"A fine sheriff you are!" he spat out

When the Lights Went Out at the Last Roundup Saloon in La Jolla, Sheriff Val Preston Saw a Heap of Things More Clearly!

By SAM BRANT

Author of "Hanging Evidence," "Welcome Party," etc.

THE moment he caught sight of Major Kennedy storming into the Last Roundup Saloon, Sheriff Val Preston lost interest in the poker game he had been watching.

There was blood in the major's eye—figuratively speaking—and literally speaking, there was blood on his face from a gash above the cheekbone. Something disagreeable had happened to the major and Preston knew he was in for it. Kennedy had been riding him pretty hard lately.

He was right. The stocky banker, whose title of "major" was merely honorary, made straight for the poker table.

"A fine sheriff you are!" he spat out. "Sitting here watching a poker game while crime is running rampant in La Jolla."

Preston tilted his chair back against the wall and regarded the irate banker with a cold eye.

"Majuh," he said, calmly. "Some day I'm gonna git mighty tired o' yore complainin'. What's eatin' yuh now?"

MAJOR KENNEDY stamped his cane on the floor. A horse had once broken his leg and he had walked with a decided limp ever since. He was sensitive of it too, and part of his irascibility was no doubt due to the limp.

"Nothin's eating me, Sheriff Val Preston, he snorted. " 'Cept a small matter o' two thousand dollars that a ranny just took away from me. Outside o' that, nothin's eating me at all. So don't let it bother yuh."

The front legs of Preston's chair came down on the floor with a loud crash.

"That *is* somethin'," he said. "When'd it happen?"

"About five minutes ago," replied the major. "I was workin' late an' was jest fixin' to close up the bank when this dry-gulcher came in. He asked me to kick in an' when I refused, he hit me in the face with his gun. He got two thousand o' the bank's money."

A rumble of comment went up from the group of men at the poker table.

"Who was he?" asked Ace Farquhar, the sardonic gambler who sooner or later got most of the gambling money in La Jolla.

"How the devil sh'd I know?" snapped the major. "He was masked; but he was a short man, not over five feet six. A cow waddy—I could tell that from his clothes."

Val Preston stood up. He was a tall man and gave the impression of being very capable as he hitched up his gunbelt.

"All right," he said. "I'll git busy an' see what I kin do."

The banker looked at him with a bitter expression.

"If yuh don't do any better findin' this *hombre* than yuh did findin' the jasper who killed Joe Morgan, I'll never see no part o' my two thousand dollars."

Preston bit his lip. The major had touched a sore spot. A week ago Joe Morgan, a rancher, had been found dead a half mile from La Jolla. A .32 caliber bullet had drilled through his heart. Blackfoot County was man's country and a .32 caliber gun was a freak.

Preston had been running himself ragged trying to find someone who had a gun of that caliber. So far he hadn't unearthed a single person who would admit to owning a "peashooter."

He had worked pretty hard however, and he didn't relish being taunted about his failure.

"Dang it, Majuh Kennedy," he snapped. "I did all I could tuh find Joe Morgan's killer. Joe didn't have an enemy in the county. All I was able to find out was that he had forty-five hundred dollars on him which he got from sellin' beefs and that he was ridin' tuh town tuh pay off his mortgage. The money wasn't found on him, so he was evidently killed fer that."

"That's twicet in one week I lost money," Major Kennedy complained. "I needed the money Joe Morgan was goin' to pay me. Now I'll have to take over his danged ranch an' I got too much land already. I—"

He stopped. Two exceedingly noisy cow waddies had stormed into the Last Roundup Saloon. They were Zeke Smith and Lester Tulfuss. Smith was six-feet two and built like a rail. Tulfuss was five-feet four and weighed two hundred pounds. The two were inseparable companions, despite the fact that they were always arguing.

They constituted Sheriff Preston's

greatest peace problem, for the pair had a bad habit of getting drunk about once a month and shooting up the town. Preston usually had to drag them to jail and lock them up until they sobered. The two were drunk now and having one of their bitter arguments.

THE banker's patience was at the breaking point.

"Shet up, yuh danged fools!" he yelled at the noisy cowboys.

The squat Tulfuss spread his legs apart and looked owlishly at Major Kennedy.

"Majuh," he said, with assumed gravity, "I don't owe yore bank one single dollar. So I says tuh yuh—go to the devil!

The major roared and brandished his thick cane.

"Yuh rotten runt!"

Lester Tulfuss calmly drew his six-shooter from his holster.

"Yuh ol' he-goat," he said, quietly. "Dance!"

The gun cracked and a bullet *zunked* into the floor not six inches from the banker's feet.

Preston sprang forward.

"Put up that gun, Tulfuss!" he thundered. "Put it up or I'll shoot it out o' yore hand."

Major Kennedy didn't wait for the sheriff to shoot the gun out of the drunken cowboy's hand. He shifted his cane to his left hand and went for his own gun.

And then things happened. The tall Zeke Smith came to the aid of his partner. His gun whipped into his hand; he fired twice, at the two ceiling lamps.

Glass tinkled and clattered, the room was plunged into sudden darkness.

But the darkness didn't stop things. Two more shots crashed out—and Sheriff Val Preston gasped as a red-hot iron seared his left side. He dropped flat to the floor. Something swished over his head and he heard someone grunt.

He reached out and his strong hands encountered boot leather. He chopped at the leather and a heavy body tumbled on top of him.

Preston's hand touched something round and hot, then a gun barrel struck him a raking blow on the temple.

Stars shot through his head; he lashed out with his fists, hard.

The sheriff reached out and felt rough clothing. He caught hold with one hand and swung with his other.

"Don't!" gasped a pained voice—the voice of Major Kennedy.

Preston grinned wolfishly in the dark and struck again. The major flopped to the floor, his body lurching against Preston's legs. The banker's cane fell across the toe of Preston's boot.

He pushed it off and stamped on it, viciously.

There were no more shots and suddenly a match was struck in the room. Preston caught sight of the scared face of Marty Moon behind the bar.

"Git a lamp," the sheriff told him.

The match went out but another was lit a moment later. It was touched to a lamp and the saloon sprang into light. Preston surveyed the barroom and grinned at what he saw. Up against one wall was the overturned poker table.

Peeking from behind it were the faces of Ace Farquhar and the other players in the late poker game.

Sitting on the floor, his back against the bar, was Lester Tulfuss. He was sleeping calmly and blood trickled from his mouth. Beside him, his elbows hooked on the bar, stood Zeke Smith. There was blood on his right fist and Zeke was looking at it with satisfaction. The opportunity to hang one on his short partner had been too good to pass up.

A few feet from Preston, Major

Kennedy was struggling to his knees. His left eye was closed and badly puffed.

Preston grinned.

THE major went for his gun, but his holster was empty. He looked around and saw the gun lying on the floor a few feet behind him. He made a dive for it. Preston beat him to it and, with a well-placed kick, sent it spinning to the other end of the room.

"That'll be all from yuh, Majuh Kennedy!" he said. "I'm arrestin' yuh fer the murder o' Joe Morgan!"

"You—what!" The major was dumbfounded. Murmurs of awe arose from the poker players behind Preston.

"Yuh heard me!" stated Preston coldly. "Yuh killed Joe Morgan and took the forty-five hundred he was goin' tuh pay yuh on his mortgage. Yuh got his money an' yore takin' his ranch too."

The major's one good eye was wild.

"Yuh're crazy!" he gasped. "Joe Morgan was killed by the same man who held me up only a little while ago."

"Yeah?" said Preston. "Mebbe yuh're right at that. The same man who held yuh up held up Morgan. Yoreself! Yuh made that danged scratch on yore face yoreself. Yuh thought I was beginnin' tuh smell a rat an' wanted tuh cover up. But yuh made a mistake. I got the goods on yuh!"

The major suddenly regained his composure.

"Prove it," he sneered.

"I'll prove it, all right," said Preston. "Morgan was killed with a pea-shooter—a .32 caliber gun. How many .32s do yuh think there are in this county? As far as I know, only one, Major Kennedy. An' *you* own that!"

"Yuh're crazy," repeated Kennedy. "My gun's a .44." He stooped and picked up his cane.

"Right," agreed Preston. "Yore gun is a .44—but yore cane isn't—that's a .32!"

The major's cane snapped up and pointed at Val Preston. The sheriff looked into a small black hole at the end of it. He had guessed right. Major Kennedy's cane wasn't a cane at all.

It was a rifle.

The shell of the cane was wood but underneath was a thin steel gun barrel.

"Yuh're smarter than I thought you were," snarled the major. "Too danged smart to live. Only one thing yuh wasn't smart about. Yuh didn't know this gun-cane was a repeater. There's one more bullet in it—an' yuh're gonna git it!"

The sheriff looked coolly at the banker-killer.

"Gimme that cane, Majuh," he said. "The game's up."

"*Take* it from me," taunted the major. His left hand was held firmly on the barrel of the cane and his right gripped the curved handle.

PRESTON'S lips tightened and he took a step forward.

The banker roared and twisted the handle of his cane-gun.

There was a crack and a *whang* —and blood spurted from the major's right eye. He screamed and staggered backwards. The heavy cane fell from his hands and clattered to the floor.

The major's body followed but a second later.

Preston looked down at the still figure of Major Kennedy, then turned to the men in the saloon.

"The danged thing backfired an' killed the majuh," he announced. "The barrel must have got stomped on an' crimped when we was fightin' in the dark. It was pretty thin steel an' the breech was home-made; couldn't stand the back-fire. Well, that saves the county some money."

COLT BARREL

He fired coolly at the men

CHAPTER I

Rebellion at the Bar X

"WHAT yuh're tryin' to tell me," Dan Bradley roared, his fierce old eyes bloodshot and glaring beneath bushy white eyebrows, "is that I'm a dodderin' old fool. That I don't know what's a-goin' on on my own ranch. That I may as well call th' undertaker an' be fitted fer a coffin. That—"

The old man was trembling with rage. His right hand, gnarled, blue-veined, banged the desk. Red Carson tried to control his own rising anger.

"Now lissen, Mr. Bradley," he pleaded. "There ain't no sense yuh flyin' off th' handle thataway. I'm jest protectin' yore own interests. This ranch ain't bein' managed right, an' it's 'bout time yuh knew it."

"Shore," Bradley shouted. "An' what I ought to do next is to fire my nephew an' make yuh manager of the Bar X. *That's* what yuh're anglin' fer. That's why yuh're here now, thinkin' yuh kin poison my mind against my own kin by makin'

Red Carson Fights to Clear His Name in

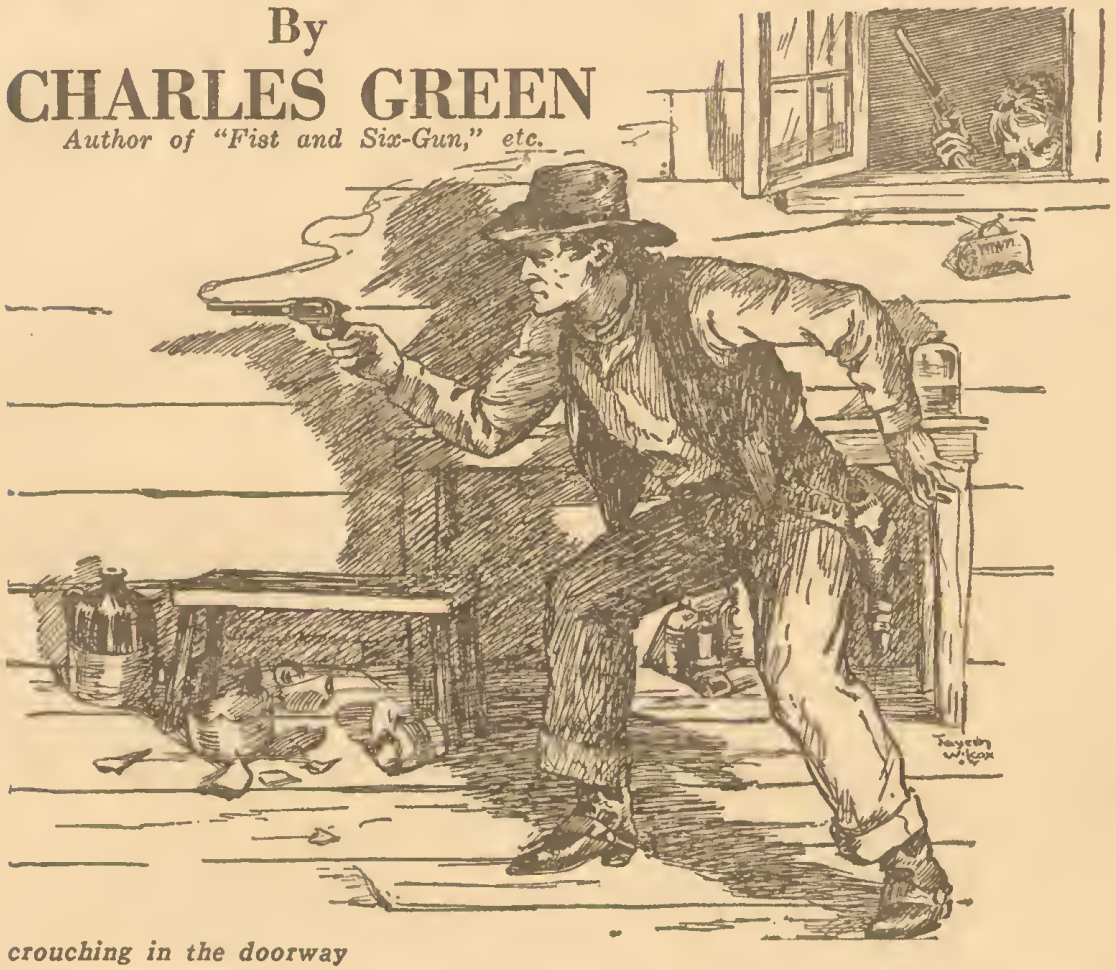
JUSTICE

A Quick-Trigger Complete Action Novelette

By

CHARLES GREEN

Author of "Fist and Six-Gun," etc.



crouching in the doorway

all kinds of rotten insinuations."

A dangerous glint crept into Red's eyes.

"Yuh asked fer it, Mr. Bradley," he said quietly, and yuh're gittin' it. Yuh *are* a dodderin' old fool!"

There was silence for a moment. Both men were statues of stone. Then Dan Bradley's wrinkled, weatherbeaten face slowly took the color of a boiled lobster. An eccentric, vitriolic old buzzard, he was accustomed to men treading softly in his presence. And the tall, bronzed cowpuncher facing him had just coolly called him a doddering old fool!

The explosion came. The old man jerked to the desk, swung back. A huge .44 now in his right hand—and berserk fury in his bloodshot eyes. The long barrel of the gun was only three feet from Red's body.

But if Red felt any fear, there was no sign of it on his face.

"Yeah," he repeated, contempt in his voice, in his eyes, "an old fool. I reckon I put up with yuh long enough. Yuh kin git yoreself a new foreman. I quit!"

"Git out!" Bradley panted. "Git

this Bang-Up Yarn of Bullets and Bandits!

out o' here 'fore I—kill yuh!"

Red hitched his belt. Unhurriedly, he strolled out on the broad veranda built onto the front of the ranchhouse. A man had just walked up the steps, pausing when he saw Red. He was a tall, burly man, thick-necked, with a coarse, brutal face. A white scar crossed his left eyebrow.

RED'S eyes narrowed. It was Stephen Gordon, Dan Bradley's nephew, and manager of the Bar X ranch.

"What yuh doin' here, Carson?" Gordon asked sharply. "Yuh're not bein' paid fer hanging 'round th' ranchhouse."

"No?" Red drawled. "An' jest what *am* I bein' paid fer?"

"Are yuh tryin' to be funny?"

"No," said Red. "Jest curious, sort o'. Five hundred head o' cattle was cut out from th' main herd last night an' driven north. I'm supposed to be ranch foreman here. Seems like to me mebbe I should've been told about it. Yore men handled it."

"What d'yuh mean—my men?"

Red stepped closer to Gordon.

"Fer the past three months," he said coldly, "yuh've been firin' as many old Bar X men as yuh possibly could. Yuh replaced 'em with gunmen from the Border—skunks that no respectable cattle outfit would hire.

"Men who take their orders from yuh—not me, an' *not* Dan Bradley. Then yuh order five hundred head of cattle cut out at night an' driven —where?"

"What are yuh implyin', Carson?" Gordon asked quietly.

"That yuh're as crooked as a pig's tail!"

Gordon's right hand, which for several seconds now was inching to the butt of his gun, flashed downward. With one tigerish leap, Red closed in, and his fist crashed out. One hundred and eighty pounds of bone and range-hardened muscle were behind the blow—and the pent-up bitterness of months of humiliation.

The sharp crack of bone striking bone was distinctly audible in the still evening air. Gordon threw up his arms. He staggered back toward the stairs. Red followed relentlessly, his blue eyes blazing. A left, a right. Gordon rolled down the steps.

Again he made a desperate attempt to draw his gun. Steel fingers gripped his gun-wrist, twisted it. The burly manager screamed with pain, dropping the gun.

"Git up!" Red snapped. "Git up an' take it!"

Gordon raised himself up on one elbow. His face was bestial with hatred.

"Git him!" he shouted hoarsely, addressing someone behind Red. "Plug him."

Red dropped flat on his face. An instinctive move, perfectly timed. A gun cracked viciously. The bow-legged little gunman who had sneaked up behind Red was now tilting the barrel of his Colt for another shot.

Red rolled over, clawing desperately for his own gun.

In back of his mind, he knew that he couldn't possibly make it. In another split-second hot lead would tear through his body.

A booming voice came from the veranda.

"What's goin' on here?"

Old Dan Bradley stood there, staring at the three men. The gunman hesitated, then replaced his Colt back in the holster strapped low on his thigh. Red stood up slowly. His eyes interlocked for a moment with Gordon's. He checked what he wanted to say, turned on his heels and walked away.

His bronzed face set and hard, Red packed all his belongings in two

wooden boxes. The sun had already dipped behind the hills, painting gorgeous colors in the west, when he approached the horse corral. He roped his sorrel, then threw a saddle over the magnificent animal. It was a gift from Dan Bradley.

Red's heart was heavy when he swung into saddle. He was through with the Bar X. There was just one thing he wanted to do before he left—say good-by to his good friend Ah Sing, the old Chinese cook.

He found Ah Sing, a very ancient and wizened little Chinaman, puffing a pipe before the abandoned cabin he had appropriated for his living quarters, some two hundred yards away from the bunkhouse. Red dismounted.

"Ah Sing," he announced, stretching out his hand, "I've come to say good-by. I'm leavin' th' ranch."

The old Chinaman's eyes clouded as he took Red's hand.

"Ah Sing will miss you velly much," he said simply.

"That goes double," said Red. "Say, I want yuh to do me a favor. I have all my stuff packed in two boxes in th' bunkhouse. I'll send somebody from town fer 'em. See that he gits it, will yuh?"

"Mr. Bladley—"

"Mr. Bradley!" Red cut him short. "I'll have nothin' more to do with th' old buzzard."

"Maybe you make mistake," Ah Sing insisted gently. "Mr. Bladley—he sick old man. Five minutes come by, he no mean what he say. He good man. And I know he love you. He love you velly much."

There was a stubborn expression on Red's mouth.

"I'm through here!" he snapped. "Well, so long, Ah Sing."

"Good-by."

The stubborn expression remained on Red's mouth as he jogged down the ever-descending trail toward town. Eleven years ago, a kid of fifteen, he had taken a cowhand's job with Dan Bradley. The Bar X had been a small outfit then, and a happy one. Dan Bradley was a good man to work for, considerate of his hands, generous, democratic; a rancher of the old school. The Bar X grew to be one of the largest ranches in the state.

Then, two years ago, Dan Bradley was suddenly taken ill. He had almost died—and had never been the same since. Terrific fits of temper, despondency—and, what to Red was sacrilege, abrupt disinterest in the ranch.

He made his nephew manager. Stephen Gordon, with his glib tongue and the faked hypocritical concern for the comfort of his uncle, completely fooled the old man.

Yet Red knew that Gordon was crooked.

He would inherit the ranch when Dan Bradley died—true; but he blandly ignored the fact that the old man was still alive. He did not care to wait. The generous allowance he received in addition to his salary was not enough to cover his wild extravagances. So he bled the ranch. And it drove Red wild to see something that years of hard work had built up wasted on gambling and boozing parties.

RED had hung on, out of loyalty to Bradley. And out of loyalty to the ranch to which he had given eleven years of his life. He had hung on, hoping against hope that Dan Bradley would some day recognize his nephew for the skunk he was.

As months went by, Stephen Gordon became bolder and bolder in his insatiable thirst for money. Selling five hundred head of cattle—and he could not have got a decent price considering the circumstances under which the sale was made—was the latest step. Red felt, as much as

hated the thought of carrying tales, that he *must* tell Dan Bradley all about it.

And when he did, his motives utterly unselfish, prompted only by loyalty to Bradley and the ranch, he was accused of angling for Gordon's job.

"Poisonin' his mind ag'in' his own kin!" he bitterly quoted Bradley.

It hurt. It hurt like hell. And though he knew just how much Dan Bradley liked him; knew without a single doubt that the moment he'd walked out of there the old man had regretted his words and cursed his black temper, still Red closed his mind against the thought of returning. He was through with the Bar X.

Through!

It was only five miles to Wesley, a dull, dusty little cowtown. Red rode up its single crooked street until he came to the town livery stable. True to the tradition of a Westerner, he saw to the comfort of his horse first. Then he crossed to the saloon facing the livery stable.

A dozen punchers were lined up at the bar. Red knew most of them. He bought four drinks, and kidded a while with the bald-headed bartender.

"By th' way, Pete," he drawled, "if yuh hear o' anybody a-needin' a rider, lemme know, will yuh? I'm lookin' fer a job."

The cowpunchers on either side of Red stared at him.

"Ain't yuh with th' Bar X no more?" one demanded incredulously.

"No, I'm plumb detached from th' outfit," Red murmured, forcing a smile to his lips. "Dan Bradley and I kinda couldn't agree. Well, so long, boys!"

He threw a dollar bill on the bar and strolled out. He was not in the mood to answer the questions the others were bound to ask.

It was quiet and dark outside; everything dead. Only the lights of the livery stable, the saloon behind him, and the small electric bulb over the entrance of a shabby little hotel up the street. The citizens of Wesley went to bed early.

Red entered the hotel and got a room from the sleepy-eyed fat Mexican proprietor. He unbuckled his gun-belt, pulled off his boots and flopped on the bed. For a long time, he lay on his back, staring at the discolored ceiling, his thoughts bitter. He finally dozed off.

He was awakened by a hammering on the door. He yawned, stretched himself, then got up to open it. Sheriff McNair stood in the doorway, three men behind him. Something about McNair's attitude puzzled Red.

The sheriff looked slowly about the room. His eyes lingered a moment on Red's gun belt, on top of the bureau. He entered and stationed himself before the bureau. It seemed to Red that the move was deliberate.

"Mind tellin' me what this is all about?" Red drawled, staring at the grizzled old sheriff.

"I hate to do it, Red," McNair replied slowly, "but—yuh're under arrest!"

"Yuh gone loco, Mac? What am I charged with?"

"Murder!" said McNair. "Th' murder o' Dan Bradley!"

CHAPTER II

The Outlaw Trail!

TENSE silence for a few seconds. Red gaped at the sheriff. He felt as if someone had just crashed a hard fist squarely between his eyes. Dan Bradley—murdered! And he—*he* was accused of it!

"Yuh—yuh *have* gone loco, Mac!" he gasped. "Or maybe I did. Yuh say Dan Bradley was murdered?"

"Yeah, Red."

"An' *I* did it?"

"I—well, it kinda looks that way, Red."

"But—but, durn it, Mac, yuh know me better 'n' that!"

The sheriff fumbled in his vest pocket. He brought forth a shiny silver disk, about the size of a half-dollar.

"The medal yuh won at th' rodeo last year, Red. Yore name's on it. I found it near Dan Bradley's body."

"I still say," Red repeated slowly, his face pale under the tan, "yuh ought to know me better 'n' that!"

McNair's eyes wavered, dropped.

"Sorry, Red," he said, "but there's more evidence. This medal might've been stolen from yuh, an' dropped near th' body by the murderer. But yuh were in Pete's saloon a couple hours ago, weren't yuh?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Yuh told the boys there yuh ain't workin' fer Dan Bradley any more. Said somethin' 'bout yuh an' him not agreein'."

"All right, I did say that. Is that proof that I—"

"Wait a minute, Red," McNair cut in quietly. "'Bout an hour after yuh walked out, Dan Bradley came in lookin' fer yuh. He was mad as a hornet, so mad he could hardly talk. An' he was packin' a gun—somethin' that Dan Bradley ain't done fer ten years now.

"The boys told him he might find yuh over at th' hotel here, then he walked out. Two minutes later, they heard a shot. They ran out an' saw a man stoopin' over Dan's body."

"They saw him, eh?" Red said tersely. "Well, why are yuh accusin' *me?*"

It was too dark to make out his face, Red. But he was a man about yore size. He ran into th' hotel here. It—well, it looks pretty bad fer yuh, Red," McNair concluded simply.

"But I give yuh my word, I ain't stirred out o' this room," Red denied fiercely. "Yuh kin ask th' Mex—"

"The Mex was upstairs asleep. Yuh're on th' ground floor."

"What about th' rear door? The man could've run right through."

The sheriff shrugged.

"Th' judge an' jury kin decide these things, Red. I've got to lock yuh up. Come on!"

IT was stifling hot in the tiny cell in back of the sheriff's office. Perspiration pouring down his face and neck, Red paced it like a caged jungle beast. Back and forth, back and forth, the heels of his boots clicking rhythmically on the cement floor. The sheriff was in the swivel chair at his desk, reading a newspaper.

Only now did Red realize what a perfect case the prosecution could weave against him. The fact that he had quit his job at the Bar X, implying a quarrel with Bradley. The medal found near the body. Bradley looking for him, packing a gun—for the first time in ten years. The murderer—for Dan Bradley had been shot in the back—seen running into the hotel. And Red was found there by the sheriff.

The fact that his six-gun hadn't been discharged meant nothing; he might have reloaded. There was enough to hang him!

And it wasn't by pure coincidence that the chain of evidence had piled up against him. The murderer of Dan Bradley was deliberately trying to pin the crime on him. That medal! Where and when could he have lost it? He always carried it in the left pocket of his flannel shirt.

Red recalled distinctly that he had it when he went in to talk to Dan Bradley. In the fight with Gordon afterward, when he had dropped to the ground to escape the treacherous bullet in the back—

"Yeah!" Red told himself tersely. "I remember now. That's where I

lost it, an' Gordon must've picked it up!"

Stephen Gordon! *He* had murdered Dan Bradley. And worked it so that he achieved the two things he wanted —revenge against Red, who would be hanged for murder; and complete possession of the ranch.

Red's big fists clenched until the knuckles showed white. He had to get out of there—before it was too late. In the morning, McNair would take him to the county prison at Kendall. Little chance to escape from there, and he *had* to escape—to establish his own innocence, and to avenge the murder of Dan Bradley.

He looked at the sheriff, absorbed in his newspaper.

Careless, easy-going old Mac! It *might* work!

"Mac!" he called, approaching the bars.

The sheriff looked up. "Yeah, Red?"

"Mind fetchin' me a glass o' water?"

The swivel chair creaked as McNair stood up.

"Shore, Red."

He filled a tin cup from a water pitcher on the desk and shuffled toward the cell. Red braced himself. Would McNair be careless enough to pass the cup through the bars?

"There's a right int'restin' piece in th' paper there, Red," the sheriff said. "'Bout a dog in Seattle savin' eight lives. Seems like there was a fire—"

His right hand went through the bars as he handed Red the cup. With the speed of a striking rattler, Red's hand flashed up and closed on McNair's wrist. He yanked downward. The sheriff crashed against the bars. Red's other hand snaked through to McNair's holster and he yanked out the big Colt.

"Believe me, Mac," he said quietly, "I hate like the devil to do this. Open th' door!"

The sheriff stared at his own gun, steady in Red's right hand, then saw the expression in the tall puncher's eyes. He shrugged. Without a word, he reached his free hand in his trouser pocket, drew his ring of keys and opened the cell door.

"I'll kinda borrow them keys, Mac," Red said.

THE sheriff handed him the ring. "Now yore gun belt, Mac. Take it off. I might need them cartridges."

McNair unbuckled his cartridge belt.

"Yuh will," he said slowly, "though it won't help yuh much. It'll just save th' state th' costs of a hangin'. 'Cause I'm goin' to bring yuh back, Red—dead or alive!"

Red sidled through the open door of the cell. He took the gun belt from McNair, then motioned him to enter the cell. The sheriff obeyed and Red locked the door.

"Some day," he said savagely, "yuh'll hand me an apology, Mac. I ain't perfect—nobody is; but yuh know durned well I wouldn't shoot a man in th' back. Think that over!"

He buckled the gun belt around his hips, jabbed the heavy Colt into the holster and trod softly to the door. He was an outlaw now, an escaped prisoner charged with murder. A man one could shoot on sight like a mad dog. Red was not worried. He'd get the murderer of Dan Bradley, even if he had to take the law into his own hands, and deal out justice through the barrel of his six-gun.

Gently, he swung the door open. Wesley had no night life and the long, crooked street was deserted. Red sneaked out. The livery stable was to his left, about three hundred yards up the street and he proceeded toward it swiftly.

And then the crack of a gun tore the dead silence. A bullet smashed the plaster a foot from his head. Red

whirled, jerking out his gun. A bright night, he could see clearly Sheriff McNair crouching just outside the entrance to his office. Red cursed under his breath. The sheriff either had a duplicate key in his pocket or knew of some trick way of opening the ancient cell lock.

Another shot. A third. The last slug had passed so close to Red's cheek that he felt the air it displaced. He leaped sideways to the protective darkness of the wall. He knew he could easily kill the sheriff as he crouched there—even as McNair must have known it. The medal he had won at the rodeo was for trick shooting; his skill with the six-gun was uncanny.

Yet even the thought of returning McNair's fire hadn't entered Red's head. He bore the sheriff, who was simply doing his duty, no enmity. Hugging the wall, he began to run toward the livery stable.

The swinging door of the saloon facing it opened suddenly. Men poured out into the street. A half dozen men, some already tugging at their gun butts.

Red stopped short. Ahead, those men from the saloon, between him and the livery stable; behind, Sheriff McNair. He might be able to fight his way through to his horse and escape, but men would die. He'd have to kill, or be killed himself.

Then, only the Border remained. Renegades, Mexican bandits. With that pack he'd have to run, living the life of a wolf, for the rest of his days.

Red hesitated, terrible indecision distorting his bronzed face. It was a hard choice—and only seconds to make up his mind. Then his face cleared.

Deliberately, he replaced the gun into the holster. He still had one desperate chance!

A narrow alley yawned between two buildings at his left. He darted into it. Behind him, he could hear McNair's hoarse voice, heavy boots pounding the wooden sidewalk. He traversed the alley, crossed a small vegetable garden, vaulted a fence. A grazing meadow ahead, and, fifty yards further, an ascending ridge of thick timber loomed black against the sky.

Bullets whined their message of hate after Red as he raced across the meadow. His heart pounding, he finally made the black haven of timber. It was only temporary safety, though, for a posse of a hundred men would comb that ridge before morning. Sooner or later, they'd ferret him out—if he stayed there.

But Red meant to seek refuge in the cabin of the one man he knew he could trust—little old Ah Sing. The audacity of choosing as his hiding place the ranch of the man he was accused of having murdered brought a thin smile to Red's lips. And then he thought of Stephen Gordon.

His lips twisted savagely. He was glad McNair had forced him into that move. If avenging the murder of Dan Bradley meant being an outlaw—well, it might be worth it at that!

CHAPTER III

Flaming Pitch Cedar

SOAKED with perspiration, every muscle of his big body weary with fatigue, Red cautiously approached Ah Sing's cabin. The stars overhead were fading now. Dawn in another hour. Gently, Red rapped his knuckles on the door. Again. To his right he could see the black outlines of the bunkhouse.

He whirled suddenly, dropping his hand to the butt of his gun. He thought he had heard a slight sound behind him. Crouching, as alert and

wary as a jungle beast, he looked around slowly, his body rigid, only his eyes moving.

He remained that way a few seconds, then straightened and wiped the sweat pouring down his face. Some little night animal had probably made that sound. His nerves were none too steady.

For the third time, he knocked on the door. Queer, that Ah Sing hadn't come to it yet. The Chinaman, Red knew, was a light sleeper. He waited a few seconds longer, then raised the latch and entered.

"AH SING!" he called softly. "Ah Sing!"

No answer. The hushed silence of a mausoleum hung over the little cabin.

Grey light preceding the dawn came through the open windows; it enabled Red to make out objects. There was Ah Sing's bunk, to his left. Empty.

The blankets were on the floor. The table near the bunk was over on its side. There was an odor of coal oil in the cabin; then Red saw the smashed kerosene lamp. It had stood on the table.

A puzzled frown on his lips, he looked around further. One of Ah Sing's old slippers lay in the middle of the floor. And what was that patch to the right of it? Red stepped closer to it, struck a match.

Blood! A pool of blood, and a trail of blood led away from it. That's why the bunk was empty. The blankets on the floor; the overturned table; a struggle — and murder! They'd murdered Ah Sing!

"But why?" Red gasped, his big fists clenching. "Why should anybody want to kill him?"

He stooped to pick up the slipper —and the move had saved his life. For a gun roared from the window, the report deafening in the utter silence. The heavy slug thudded into the wall. If he hadn't stooped, it would have blown the top of his head away.

Like a cat, Red leaped sideways. With one sinuous movement, he drew his gun, whirling to the window. A man's face was framed there, one arm and shoulder shoved through the rectangular opening. A streak of orange stabbed at the semi-darkness as he again squeezed the trigger.

But Red had jerked his a split-second earlier, firing from the hip. The other's shot went wild, and he dropped the gun. His face was no longer in the window; just his hand, clutching the sill. Then the fingers slid off slowly.

Red leaped closer to the window, powder smoke still curling from the barrel of his Colt. He had recognized the ugly, pock-marked face in the window—it was the bowlegged little gunman who'd tried to plug him in the back during the fight with Stephen Gordon.

This meant that Gordon knew he was in the cabin. That sound he had heard before—human feet made it, and not an animal as he had supposed.

Gordon must h a v e stationed a guard to patrol the ranch, his guilty heart fearing that Red might escape and return.

But was the guard acting on his own initiative, or had he already notified Gordon? If the cabin was surrounded, Red was trapped like a rat. If it wasn't—he still had a chance to escape.

Slowly, he approached the window. He paused to the left of it, took off his Stetson. There was an old newspaper on the floor near his right foot. Red picked it up, made a tight little roll of it, hung his hat over one end and gently pushed it out in front of the window.

Crack! A high-powered rifle now, and the report came immediately. As if slapped by some huge invisible

hand, the hat went flying across the cabin.

Trapped! The cabin was surrounded. Probably a dozen men crouched in the darkness, behind cover of boulders, tree trunks, themselves invisible, but ready to pump hot lead the instant he revealed himself.

Sooner or later, they were *bound* to get him.

"If they wait long enough they can starve me out," Red told himself grimly. "Ah Sing ate in th' kitchen. Wouldn't have a scrap o' food here. An', durn it, no water either!"

His fingers steady, he rolled himself a cigarette. As he puffed on it, he considered the mad plan of rushing out, killing as many of those skunks as he could, and going down himself. What was the sense of prolonging the thing?

And as if Gordon had read his mind, his voice now boomed from the outside:

"Come on out, Carson—an' I might give yuh a break. Or do yuh want to look like Ah Sing in there?"

Red smiled grimly. He knew what mercy he'd get from Gordon and his pack of gunmen. Torture first; then they'd string him up. But what did he say about Ah Sing? His words implied that Ah Sing's body was in the cabin somewhere; yet where could it be?

Red shrugged. He grounded out the cigarette beneath his heel and looked around the cabin. The long-handled old broom in the corner was just the thing he wanted. Stooping, careful that at no time should his body pass one of the windows, Red crossed the cabin. He picked up the broom, then found his hat.

He returned to the window on the right, and kneeled beneath it. His hat was now suspended on the end of the broom. Slowly, he swung the broom at right angles with his body. The stick was just long enough for the hat to reach the other window.

Carefully, he straightened, at the same time raising the hat. Someone fired the split-instant the hat appeared in the rectangular opening of the window. Red saw the flash of the man's rifle behind a tree at the right; even saw the blur of his body. He fired twice, so quickly that the two shots blended into one.

A long, drawn-out scream of a man mortally wounded! The rifleman stepped out from behind the tree, his arms high up over his head. The scream choked off as the man crumpled.

A hail of lead now came screaming into the window. But Red had already dropped to the floor, grim exultation in his eyes. That made it one less.

They'd get him eventually—sure; but not very many would live to boast about it!

The firing died down. Again Red heard Gordon's voice, thick with rage.

"Yuh're ten to one!" he yelled. *"Git him!"*

Now a terrific volley poured on the cabin. Every one of the men must be firing as quickly as he could squeeze the trigger. Red coolly rolled another cigarette, lighted it. He ran no danger from the bullets flying through the windows; and the heavy logs comprising the walls of the cabin offered perfect barricade.

SUDDENLY the door crashed open, the latch giving way under a kick from a heavy boot. Two men crouched in the doorway, blazing away at him. There were others behind them.

On his knees, Red jerked up his gun. Unhurriedly, although bullets whined about him like angry hornets, he began squeezing the trigger of his heavy blue .44. Somehow, he felt amazingly cool, detached. There were

his targets; he was firing automatically.

Crack!

The Mexican to the left of the door dropped as if his feet had suddenly been jerked from under him. The gunman behind him died as he tried to leap the Mexican's body. Twice again Red jerked the trigger. The hammer clicked on an empty shell.

Red made a dive for the gun dropped into the cabin by the first man at the window. His eager fingers clutched it. A warning instinct made him look up. He saw a face four feet from him. A man was thrusting his gun arm through the window, the barrel of his gun swinging around and downward. Fierce triumph shone already in his eyes.

There was no time to take aim. Red twisted convulsively, then fired. The bullet smashed under the man's chin, plowing upward through his head. Red rolled over until he was directly beneath the window at the wall and facing the door, his trigger finger relaxed. Now there was no one in the doorway. Evidently they'd had enough for a while.

Red leaped to his feet, jerked the Mexican's body, lying over the threshold, into the cabin, and kicked the door shut. Working with feverish haste, he broke both revolvers and shoved fresh cartridges into the chambers. He stationed himself at the wall so that he could command both windows and the door and waited, feet astride, both guns hip-high.

Outside, a strange silence reigned. Red had no illusions that Gordon and his men might have abandoned the fight. He felt instinctively that the burly manager was up to something. He waited.

Now he heard a peculiar sound that he couldn't quite identify. It seemed to come from behind the cabin somewhere. A sort of rustling, crackling sound. It seemed to get warmer in the cabin.

"Carson!" It was Gordon's voice. He repeated, "Carson!"

"What do you want?" Red shouted back.

"Better come out now!"

"Come an' git me, yuh skunk!" Red said contemptuously.

A brief pause, then Gordon's voice again.

"Yuh'll have to come out, yuh durned fool! The cabin is on fire. I'm giving yuh yore last chance to come out—with yore hands up over yore head. Then we might make terms."

The cabin on fire! It was the end!

"Nothin' doin'," Red called back.

"All right," Gordon shouted, "mebbe roasting to death with a dead Chink is more pleasant. Take yore choice, Carson!" he laughed loudly.

Tiny wisps of smoke now began curling into the cabin. The logs of which the cabin was built were perfectly dry—and, as Red now realized from the smell of the smoke, pitch cedar! All of which meant that they'd burn like tinder. In a few minutes the cabin would be a roaring hell of flames and smoke.

HIS jaw set, Red moved toward the door. There was nothing left to do now except to go out and try to bring a few of them down before hot lead tore through his body. A certain thought in back of his mind checked him. Twice now Gordon had implied that Ah Sing was in the cabin.

"—roasting to death with a dead Chink."

Gordon must have killed Ah Sing, of course. But who had removed the body—without Gordon's knowledge? For it certainly was not in the cabin. Did Ah Sing come to, after having been left for dead? Come to and escape?

That huge patch of freshly-dried

blood—that's where they must have left Ah Sing's body. And the trail of blood leading away from it— Red suddenly caught his breath. The trail of blood did *not* lead to the door, as it would if Ah Sing had dragged himself there and escaped. It continued for about six feet, the trail perfectly clear, to one corner of the cabin. There it stopped, not at the wall, but at least three feet from it.

"He dragged himself there," Red said to himself. "No doubt about that. They're places where he rested and bled more. But why did he want to go *there?* And what became of him?"

It was an amazing mystery. For a moment, Red forgot the terrific heat that was now stealing over the cabin. He was unaware of the distinct crackle of burning logs. The trail of blood diminished as it went to the wall, showing clearly that it did begin at the huge patch near the door.

Like a hound on a hot scent, not having the faintest idea just what he was looking for, yet tense with the instinctive conviction that it might mean his last chance for life, Red followed the trail to where it ended. Ended abruptly, not just trickled away.

He dropped on his hands and knees.

The heat in the cabin was now almost unbearable, and it was quickly filling with smoke. Acrid smoke that tore at his lungs. Already he was finding it difficult to breathe.

He tapped the floor with his knuckles. His heart leaped. The sound rang hollow. There was a cavity of some sort beneath the unpainted white pine planks!

One plank seemed loose. Red clawed at it with his fingernails. It came out—a thin section of a plank, two inches wide and six inches long. He now saw an eye ring screwed in the plank beneath the one he had just removed. He yanked on it, but nothing happened He tried it again, harder. Whatever the ring was supposed to lift would not come up!

Red let go the ring. Desperately aware of the grim fact that he could not cling to consciousness longer than perhaps another minute in the cabin, now a blistering hell of heat and smoke, he began passing his palms over the adjoining boards. Evidently there was something else he must do before the eye ring worked. Yet every other plank was smooth and secure.

"I lose," he said simply.

To linger in the cabin another few seconds meant unconsciousness—and cremation. Red preferred to die fighting. He picked up his two guns off the floor and made a step in the direction of the door.

On a sudden impulse, he whirled and reached down for the eye hook. Just one more try. His fingers found it. He yanked on it with all his strength—and went crashing backward. A three-foot-square section of the floor, forming a trap door, swung up. Swung up as easily, as if it operated on ball-bearing hinges. A child might have lifted it.

RED crawled to the yawning hole the trap door revealed. Not caring how deep it might be, he dropped headlong into it, twisting in the air so that his left shoulder might take the shock of the fall when he hit the bottom.

It wasn't much of a drop, five feet or so. Red rolled over on his back. His shoulder was bruised, but not sprained. For the next few seconds, he was content simply to lie there and inhale deep gulps of fresh air into his tortured lungs. His head cleared instantly, though tears still streamed down his face. He laughed suddenly, and sat up.

"I was kneelin' on it," he said

aloud. "I was kneelin' on that trap door, an' couldn't figger out why it wouldn't lift up!"

He turned to lift himself to his feet—and froze still. His left hand was resting on a man's shoulder!

CHAPTER IV

Showdown

RED drew his hand away. His heart was still pounding, but reason now guided him. It must be Ah Sing's shoulder that he had just touched. The sudden thought that the old Chinaman might be still alive and in need of help made Red scramble to his feet. He struck a match.

Ah Sing lay flat on his stomach on the hard-packed earthen floor. A foot from his head was a tiny raised platform, supporting an exquisitely-carved, pot-bellied little jade god. Red touched the Chinaman's hand, then the back of his neck. The body was cold; he had been dead several hours.

"Crawled down here to die," Red said softly. "To his little temple!"

Now Red understood where Ah Sing would disappear for a few days several times every year—a standing mystery at the Bar X. He had dug himself a little temple beneath the cabin—a place of worship that would always be private; where the dignity of his little god would be safe from the ridicule of the good-natured but skeptical cowhands. Dug it out himself over probably a period of years.

The match between Red's fingers burned out. He lighted another. There was something near Ah Sing's right hand that aroused his curiosity. He now saw that it was a cigar box. Still curious, he stooped and raised the lid. The cigar box was packed with bills—Ah Sing's wages for the past twenty-two years.

But the tiny flame of the match revealed something else—a grey envelope resting on top of the money. Red stared at it incredulously. "Red Carson" was written across the envelope, and he recognized the shaky handwriting.

Dan Bradley's!

Red tore open the envelope. The long sheet of paper it contained was covered with Dan Bradley's handwriting. By the light of another match, he began reading it. Tense excitement gripped him before he was halfway through. He finished, folded the paper and stuffed it in the pocket of his shirt.

"Now I've *got* to git out of here!" he said through clenched teeth.

The air was still sweet in the little cellar temple, free from smoke. Must be an outlet somewhere. Red picked up one of the two guns he had still held on to when he fell headlong through the trap door. He jammed it into his holster and moved to the left. There seemed to be some sort of opening there.

There was—a tunnel just large enough to permit the passage of Red's big body! He crawled into it and inched forward on his stomach. He came to a sharp elbow-turn in the passageway, crawled around it; now he could see light, perhaps twenty feet ahead.

Cautiously, he continued his snake-like progress. Five feet, five more. He reached the mouth of the tunnel. It widened here. He saw that he was in a pit beneath a gnarled old stump. Dead roots, some the thickness of his thigh, twisted curious patterns over his head.

Two roots straight ahead of him made a V-like opening. Red crawled through it, stood up. It was good to feel the earth beneath his feet, and space about him. No longer was he a trapped animal in a hole. He drew his gun.

An enormous boulder ahead of him

blocked the cabin somewhere beyond it. But he could smell it burning—smell the acrid pitch cedar smoke; could even feel the heat where he stood. The sky in the east was crimson.

Dawn!

Softly, he tread to the boulder, stole around it. He caught his breath and flattened himself against the stone.

Stephen Gordon stood only a dozen feet ahead of him, a rifle cradled in the crook of his left arm. He was staring at the cabin, now a roaring furnace.

"Go on, yuh yellow bellies!" he yelled suddenly, waving his rifle. "He ought to be half-cooked now. There's fifty dollars fer each of yuh if yuh pull him out alive."

Now Red saw that six men were cautiously closing in on the cabin. A thin, hard smile on his lips, he inched up behind Gordon. His left arm snaked out, catching Gordon under the chin. The barrel of his Colt jabbed viciously into the small of the manager's back.

"Drop that rifle, Gordon!"

Gordon dropped the rifle, although Red's command wasn't necessary. He glanced over his shoulder, and a shrill scream of fear burst from his lips.

"Yuh're dead, yuh devil!"

The men approaching the cabin whirled.

"One funny move from any o' yuh *hombres,*" Red said coldly, "an' yore boss here is hell-bound! Stay right where yuh are!"

Gordon babbled, trembling with fear.

"Yuh couldn't git out o' there! *Yuh couldn't!*"

Red jabbed him again with the barrel of his Colt.

"Back up!" he commanded. "I reckon yuh an' me are takin' a trip."

Step by step, urged by the pressure of Red's gun, they retreated toward the bunkhouse. Gordon's men were statues of stone.

"Where are we going?" Gordon quavered.

"To the hoss corral," Red drawled. "This ain't a walkin' trip."

He jerked his head at the sound of horsehoofs as a dozen men came galloping over a rise at the bunkhouse. Red recognized the foremost, astride a rangy buckskin. It was Sheriff McNair. Red smiled grimly. They must have seen the burning cabin, visible for miles.

"Mebbe," he murmured to Gordon, "we won't have to be takin' this here trip."

The sheriff saw Red. He reined the buckskin so hard that the animal reared on its haunches, front hoofs pawing the air. McNair slid out of the saddle. Gun in hand, he slowly approached Red.

"Elevate!" he said laconically. "Up!"

Red shook his head, grinning.

"It's all right, Mac," he drawled coolly. "I was headin' fer yore office when yuh came along."

"Decided to give yoreself up, eh?"

"No," said Red.

"No?" the sheriff echoed, his eyes narrowing.

"Don't git nervous, Mac," Red grinned. "I was bringin' yuh th' murderer o' Dan Bradley." He grabbed Gordon by the shoulders, swung him around. "There's yore man, Sheriff!"

"PROOF, Red," McNair said. "Look at his face!"

Gordon's face was grey with fear. McNair glanced at it, turned back to Red.

"I still say," he repeated, "what's yore proof?"

Red reached into his shirt pocket. He unfolded the piece of paper he had found in Ah Sing's cigar box.

"Listen to this, Mac: 'My last will and testament, drawn by myself on

th' sixteenth day o' November, the year o' our Lord, nineteen hundred and thirty-four, in sound health o' body an' mind. Because I've found my nephew Stephen Gordon, now manager o' th' Bar X ranch, guilty o'—' "

"I burned it!" Gordon screamed. "How could yuh have it? Yuh're dead. Yuh're a ghost that returned to hound me—" His voice choked off.

"Takin' it all in, Mac?" Red asked quietly.

"Yeah, Red," McNair replied. "Go ahead!"

Red returned to the paper:

"'—guilty o' misappropriatin' funds o' the ranch entrusted to his care, betrayin' my confidence in himself, an' in general provin' himself to be a thievin', murderous, treacherous coyote, I hereby cut him off without a penny, makin' null an' void th' will I had previously made. I bequeath my—' "

Like a released coiled spring, Red launched his body in a long tackle. The full weight of his body struck Gordon before the latter had a chance to bring up the gun he had just drawn.

Both men crashed to ground. Red's big fist made a short arc, landing below and slightly behind Gordon's ear. The burly manager sighed and lay still. Red glanced over his shoulder at the sheriff.

"Still takin' it all in, Mac?" he panted.

The sheriff shook his head.

"When yuh move, yuh move fast! . . . Yeah, I'm takin' it all in, Red. Finish readin' that paper."

Red got up. He picked up the piece of paper, crumpled now, smoothed it between his palms.

"There ain't much more, Mac," he murmured. "It says: 'I bequeath my entire estate, consistin' principally o' the Bar X ranch, to Red Carson, th' only man who had th' gumption to stand up on his hind legs an' call me an old fool—which same I am.' It's signed—Dan Bradley!"

"Where did yuh get that will?" McNair asked sharply.

RED explained to him where he found it.

"Yuh see, Mac, Ah Sing must've been murdered because he was witness to th' quarrel between Dan Bradley an' Gordon. In my trial, his testimony might be bad fer Gordon—an' Ah Sing was a friend o' mine. So Gordon shot him."

"But why," McNair asked curiously, "did Dan Bradley give it to Ah Sing?"

"There's a note pinned to it that tells the whole story, Mac. Lissen: 'Dear Red: I hope yuh won't have to read this. I'm goin' into town to file a new will. That skunk nephew o' mine knows it. He ain't above tryin' to murder me on th' way. So I've made a duplicate o' my will, an' am enclosin' it here. Ah Sing will give it to yuh if—well, if anythin' happens to me. Make th' Bar X th' ranch it used to be, boy—an' good luck'!"

McNair glanced at Gordon's limp body.

"I never enjoy watchin' a hangin'," he said quietly, "but I'll enjoy this one."

"So will I, Mac. But do yuh see now why Dan had been lookin' fer me—packin' a gun?"

"I see a heap o' things," said McNair, stretching out his hand. "Chief o' same is that I'm what yuh called Dan Bradley—an old fool."

Red gripped the sheriff's hand. He grinned happily.

"I ain't arguin' with th' law, Mac," he said meekly. "All right, have it yore way!"

Join THE RANGE RIDERS' CLUB! See Page 128

Tough *Faces*

When Mudhen's hands got to where they was goin', they wasn't no guns there

When Old Mudhen Ran the Barber Out of the Cowtown of Black Rock, Whiskers—and Trouble—Sprouted in All Directions!

By TOM GUNN

Author of "Painted Post Pardners," "Gun Rannies," etc.

BLACK ROCK is a cowtown, but you'd a-thought the House of David had took up headquarters there when they wasn't no barber in the place. That is, if you'd a-walked down the main street and looked at all them beards the waddies was swishin' in th' breeze like dray-hosses' tails. Full beards, they was, too—some of 'em full of a number of things that wouldn't a-been there if they'd a-took the trouble to comb 'em out. You couldn't exactly say that Mudhen, that two gun-slingin', sawed-off mustang, was responsible for all of it, but he had a right smart to do with it. He found out that some of the fellers had razors, but most of 'em didn't, and so he ups and says the first man that broke over

and shaved hisself when the rest of 'em couldn't was goin' to have to answer to him and his two guns. And they wasn't nobody, unless it was the sheriff, that was hankerin' for a run-in with that ugly *hombre* when he got mad.

Before all this started they had been a barber in town named Ed Bowman, but Mudhen didn't like him.

An' when Mudhen found out Bowman was just scrapin' chins as a sideline while he was out of a job shearin' sheep he took a couple o' extry twists in his straggly mustache an' a couple o' extry slugs o' Charley Jenkins' liquor, an' went down an' run Bowman out o' town with two guns barkin' at his heels.

Mudhen, o' course, hadn't figgered on what the consequences would be. At first, he wasn't much pleased, until he discovered ever'body else was gettin' to be about as ornery lookin' as he was. An' then the way things finally wound up, Mudhen would a-liked to do it all over agin about once ever' two or three months, provided it didn't git to be too much work for him.

Mudhen never was fond o' work an' wouldn't a-been able to eat regular if it wasn't that him an' Charley Jenkins, the saloon keeper, was partners in that little ranch eight miles up the creek.

It seemed like a good Spring for the beards, an' before very long all them cowpunchers begun to look like John the Baptists. Them whiskers budded, blossomed an' growed an' flourished like Johnson grass in a strawberry patch.

Old man Carswell, the justice of the peace, had the best lookin' crop, but that was because he had half a head start on the rest of 'em. He hadn't shaved, yuh see, for nigh on to six months, anyway. But they wasn't possibly nobody could look as mean an' ugly as Mudhen, with them sandy, dirty whiskers bristlin' in all directions.

Yuh can imagine what a shock such a sight as all them bearded punchers might give a stranger. But Lord, you ought a-seen ol' Sheriff Bill Roach one day when he popped into town after havin' been away a while on business and walked unsuspectin' into Charley's saloon.

ROACH blame near hopped out o' his boots backward and had two guns out an' the whole gang covered before even he knowed what he was doin'.

But they wasn't nobody there that had done no cattle rustlin' or hoss stealin', at least as far as anybody else knowed; and the sheriff stopped hisself in time before he could pull a trigger.

Soon as the sheriff kinda got hisself calmed down, he stuck his guns where they belonged and sidled up to the bar lookin' sheepish and bought drinks for the crowd. Then, by way of explainin' what made him git so excited, he went out to his saddle bags and brung in a couple of posters, which he opened up and spread out on the bar.

They was advertisin' a $5000 reward for the capture, dead or alive, of a couple o' the meanest lookin' *hombres* you ever saw, that had been rustlin' cattle over in Kickapoo County—an' both of 'em had full, black beards. That is, in their pictures on the posters the whiskers was black, but you know nearly any kind o' whiskers looks black in a picture, and these was so thick you couldn't tell what either face looked like. All you could see was barber fodder and a couple o' eyes and a nose stickin' out o' the upper regions.

"Lord Amighty," say the sheriff, "I shore thought I was seein' things. I've seed double before, but it would take powerful strong whiskey to

make me see a dozen if they wasn't a dozen there.

"An' now the question is, how could I ever catch these here two rustlers if they was to show up here an' all you boys went on wearin' them beards? For all I know, they may be two o' you fellers, but if I was to arrest all o' you, that would look funny, especially if I was to string up the whole crowd to a tree —besides bein' a lot o' trouble."

An' then the sheriff gets Charley to let him stick up them posters on the mirror back of the bar where ever'body could see 'em. Funny how embarrassin' such a little thing can be.

There was ever'body lookin' at them posters an' then eyein' up ever'body else in the crowd suspicious-like, and fust thing you knowed the whole blame herd got to feelin' so self-conscious that they faded away. All but Charley an' the sheriff, an' Charley had to stay to tend his bar.

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled, hog-tied and hobbled," says the sheriff. "Danged if it don't look like I ought to run in the whole bunch after all."

But Charley told him he didn't think none o' them boys would git into no cattle rustlin' and that anyway it wouldn't be right to run in all of 'em. The sheriff said maybe so, but it shore would be a fine place for a couple o' rustlers with beards to be hidin' out.

After the sheriff had gone, the boys drifted back, bein' careful, though, not to come two by two, an' started up their poker game. But things didn't seem to go so well then, an' ever' day from then on they begun to git worse an' worse.

Ever'body seemed to be suspicious of ever'body else, an' ever'body was nervous an' jumpy. Especially when they looked up suddenly and seen them two bearded faces peepin' out at them from behind the bar.

An' then somebody started a sort o' gossipy whisperin' around that maybe not all them whiskers o' the boys was genu-ine stuff, an' that it could be just possible that somebody might be wearin' false beards, like them actors in the tent show that come through a while back. They wasn't no names mentioned, but that just made it all the worse.

AN' it even got so that when a couple punchers would git into a argyment around th' bar, instead o' pullin' hawg-legs they would pull whiskers—each other's, I mean. It was disgraceful to see a couple o' able-bodied cowpunchers tryin' to do the work of a barber on each other in that rough kind o' way.

Things was gittin' into a turrible state, an' no tellin' what might a-happened if a couple o' mavericks hadn't blowed in one day on the mail waggin.

As soon as they walked into Charley's bar, their eyes popped out like a cowhorse in the last stages o' loco. They might a-got shot themselves for not havin' no beards, but Charley stopped the boys and reminded them that these here two fellers was strangers within their gates and didn't mean no harm.

After they had got their breaths a few minutes an' a few slugs o' Charley's best liquor, one of 'em got up nerve enough to tell Charley quiet-like over the bar that they was both barbers an' lookin' for work.

"Me," says he, "I'm Jefferson Davis Grady, a full graduate o' the Nolin Barber College of Fort Worth. An' my partner here is Robert E. Lee Crawford, who finished a course in the Great International Hair Dressing University, also in Fort Worth. We didn't expect to drop into such luck as it looks like we have today by comin' here."

Charley let out a squawk that sounded like a bullfrog in th' bottom of a beer barrel, and then he yelled

at them: "Welcome, fellers. Have one on the house!"

The punchers that had settled to the back o' the saloon to go on playin' poker hadn't heard these two fellers tell Charley they was barbers.

But they never failed to ketch th' last three words Charley sung out; an' not willin' to miss out on nothin' like that, they made a rush for the bar all at once, with them beards lookin' like one great big dirty floor mop sweepin' through the air.

Charley done the honors all around without grumblin', tuckin' his beard in the front o' his apron to keep it out o' th' way until he would need it to wipe up the bar with. Then he done his duty as host, interducin' our two new citizens an' hopin' they'd find enough business in Black Rock to keep 'em out o' mischief.

Most o' th' bunch snickered in their beards at that last remark, soundin' like hosses goin' to their troughs when they heerd the barn door open. But Mudhen didn't seem to be so amused. He remembered that last barber he had had to run out o' town.

Mudhen snorted out somethin' about he'd see to it that no danged tenderfoot barbers wouldn't do no mischief around that town, as long as he didn't ketch the rheumatics in the trigger fingers o' both hands at th' same time. Sheriff Roach wasn't around that day, so naturally these newcomers thought Mudhen was the sheriff without his star.

An' just as Mudhen said what he did, he shoved hisself right in between them two chin scrapers, showin'-off, y' know, before company. It seems that Jefferson Davis Grady hadn't exactly caught just what it was that Mudhen was sayin', so he asks him over again.

Mudhen's face screwed up like a storm cloud just before the lightnin' begun to flash, an' he turned around slow-like to face the man that had the nerve to ask him to say somethin' over. Charley seen trouble ahead, an' tried to quiet things down by pourin' a drink all around to ever'body an' crackin' some joke about why does the Mudhen cross the road.

That didn't seem to cheer Mudhen up none, but he turned slow around to the bar again. An' then it had to happen, o' course. That little feller Crawford, bein' kinda flustered by what was goin' on, picked up the wrong glass—picked up Mudhen's liquor, if yuh please. Lord Amighty, that was just like stickin' a *banderillo* into the meanest bull in the world at a bull fight. An' Mudhen bellered just that way, but it was too late—Crawford, pore feller, was already swallerin' the liquor.

THINGS happened a lot quicker than it takes to tell about 'em. I was standin' right in close, an' I didn't even have time to dodge. I seen Grady's right hand go to his vest pocket just a split fraction of a second before Mudhen's two hands started for his lead-slingers on each hip.

An' then I seen a flash that I woulda swore was lightnin' that went right down Mudhen's back. It was so quick that when Mudhen's hands got to where they was goin' they wasn't no guns there to pull, an' both of 'em was clatterin' on the floor. That barber had been just thinkin' faster than Mudhen an' had used his razor to slice that catteridge belt so neat through the middle you'd a-thought it never was all together.

Well, sir, ol' Mudhen was as surprised as a man is when he starts to shovel a big hunk o' beef into his mouth an' it slips off o' the fork an' he chomps down on his own tongue instead.

An' when all them punchers who had just started dodgin' to git

out o' the way o' his ammunition begun straightenin' up and snickerin' behind their beards, it was too much for Mudhen. He just sidled out the door an' jumped on his roan without sayin' a word to nobody and without even pickin' up his cannons, and started high-tailin' it for the ranch.

Charley had to come around the bar and gather up them guns an' what was left of the catteridge belt. Mudhen slipped back at night to git the guns and a new belt from Charley to fasten 'em to.

Ever'body at the bar was so tickled at the trick that Grady had pulled that they began buyin' drinks for them barbers, so many that Charley done a rushin' business for two hours. Them barbers wasn't no amateurs at drinkin', neither, and they put away more liquor than any two men ever did at that place without payin' for it.

Before the evenin' was over the boys had fixed it up for Grady and Crawford to take over the old shop that Ed Bowman had used an' was to set up in business as soon as they sobered up next day. That suited the tenderfoots an' they thanked ever' body all around and went down to the waggin yard to find a place to sleep.

The next day, before them barbers had sobered up enough to git goin', Mudhen come back to town, lookin' mean. He didn't have nothin' to say to nobody till he got to Charley's saloon. Then him and Charley got off in a corner and had a long talk.

Charley had a mighty serious look on his face as he went about wipin' up the bar with his beard and wringin' out the beer foam. Mudhen just hung around, drinkin' slow an' easy an' sayin' nothin' until somebody come in and said them barbers was layin' out their razors an' shears an' gittin' ready to do business.

Mudhen was the first one to start. The rest o' the crowd o' punchers followed, but they kept at a safe distance, because they knowed there was goin' to be trouble when he walked into that there barber shop.

Nobody would git up close enough to see all that happened, but they all seen Mudhen haul out both guns as he kicked the door open an' let go with both of 'em, just one shot from each gun. Then he disappeared inside an' ever'thing got quiet.

The punchers hung back a minute to be sure Mudhen was finished with his shootin'. An' ever'body had a awful disappointed look on their faces.

"WHY couldn't that son-of-a-gun let us git shaved before he sent them chin scrapers to their heavenly rest?" somebody squawked. "They ought to be a law agin such goin's-on.

"An' look at all the trouble Mudhen puts us to. Now we got to go arrange some sort of a funeral for them pore devils an' then wait till some other barber comes along to shave us."

They wasn't no more noise come from th' barber shop, so the boys decided to go in an' clean up the mess an' git it over with as soon as possible. So they strolled on up carefullike an' peeped in.

An' what a surprise they got; They wasn't no dead barbers at all. Both of 'em was standin' beside their chairs with their aprons on an' their razors in their hands an' ready to holler "Next!"

Mudhen, the mangy fool, was standin' in a corner, holdin' his guns on 'em an' laughin'. With them two shots he fired he'd only picked off a couple o' shavin' mugs from the shelf. He shore looked like he was havin' the time o' his life.

"Come in, gents," Mudhen yelled. "I'm the manager here now an' these two hobos is goin' to work for me from now on. Fust thing, though, I

want to git shaved an' git my own hair chopped off.

"I want ever' one of you to git out your guns an' stand by while I git worked on. An' if they don't do a good job of it or if anything happens to me, they won't be airy drop to drink in this town for the next six weeks. I got it fixed up with Charley not to serve a drink o' liquor for that long if ever'thing don't go off smooth, includin' my face. Now stand by, fellers; an' you know Charley is a man o' his word."

Well, they wasn't no argyment there.

Them punchers knowed Charley would do what he said he would. An' besides, this looked like enough fun to keep things lively around the town for a while. So ever'body hauls out their hawg-legs and Mudhen climbs in a chair.

Jim Crandall got out his French harp and started playin', just for amusement, that old tune that winds up with "Shave an' a haircut, fifteen cents." Nobody knowed all the words to it, but all the punchers could come in strong on them last two lines ever'time Jim got around to them.

While the music went on, them two barbers, lookin' scared as coyotes, got to work on Mudhen, both of 'em at the same time.

About that time ol' Lillibridge, the hoss doctor, come clompin' along on his peg leg, sweatin' an' puffin', to git hisself trimmed up. Lily had a crop o' whiskers that looked like one o' them palm leaf fans they pass out at revival meetin's. If he'd stay out o' th' sun, all he had to do to keep cool was to wiggle his head up and down, though other folks got most o' th' benefit o' th' breeze.

Lily blinked in through them thick specs of his an' then come stompin' in, moppin' his face clear back up over his ears. Y'see, he didn't have much hair on his head to worry about.

Mudhen, lookin' as near respectable as anybody ever saw him, climbed out o' th' chair and admired hisself in the mirror. Then a bright idea struck him. He sent one o' th' punchers down to the saloon to git Charley to close up and bring three or four bottles o' good whiskey for a house-warmin' celebration—an' a keg o' beer for Lily.

BY the time Charley got there with the liquor, another bright idea struck Mudhen. He decided to be a barber himself, and let Grady off from that work an' git busy an' shine up ever'body's boots. Mudhen put down several slugs o' liquor pretty fast before he started sharpenin' up a razor, an' ever'body could see he wasn't goin' to be long in gittin' pretty drunk, so there wasn't nobody hankerin' to git in his chair.

Mudhen looked around over the crowd an' picked out Lily to practise on. Lily didn't seem to mind much, especially as long as Charley kept fillin' up his beer mug ever' few minutes.

An' Grady, lookin' like a hound dog that had got caught suckin' eggs, hunted around and found some boot-shinin' stuff an' some brushes and got ready to do his part.

I guess Mudhen wasn't much of a barber, 'cause he took nearly all day on Lily, while Lily laid back with his peg leg propped up on the foot rest and swallered down th' beer. An' then, too, the liquor got to makin' Mudhen see funny, because he decided Lily's whiskers growed in circles and he had to shave him consequently, with a circular movement o' th' razor.

Crawford all this time was shavin' an' cuttin' hair for all he was worth, while Grady was doin' a pretty good job o' shinin' up all th' boots in th' place, goin over some of 'em two or three times. I guess they must train them young barbers pretty good up

where they come from, because Grady went at it like he had been doin' that kind o' work ever since he was born.

It was a pretty neat lookin' bunch o' cowpunchers by th' time that day was over, th' best I ever seen this side of Fort Worth. Even ol' Mudhen an' Lily didn't look so bad, though Lily's face did kind o' resemble a side o' fresh pork that hadn't been scraped too well in hawg-killin' time.

Mudhen wouldn't let nobody pay for their work that day, but when it come time to close up for th' day he said they'd have to pay from then on, and furthermore he was goin' to be the one to take in the cash.

An' to make things worse, he wouldn't let Grady an' Crawford shave theirselves nor each other. He thought it would be a good joke on them nifty lookin' city fellers to let them be ornery lookin' for a spell while ever'body else was spick an' span, an' with him takin' in all the money.

To keep them barbers under his eye and not let 'em shave, Mudhen hired a waggin and took 'em out to that there ranchhouse o' his an' Charley's that night. After he got 'em there he shoved 'em into a room, takin' care to see that they didn't have no razors or other tools, and set his bulldog, Geronimo, to watch 'em. He knowed Geronimo wouldn't let 'em git out o' there, so he went on and got his sleep.

Next mornin' he herded 'em into the waggin an' brang 'em back to town, opened up the barber shop, made 'em sweep out an' then line up back o' their chairs for business. They naturally wasn't much business that day, except for a few punchers tryin' to look like dudes. An' all th' time Mudhen kept watch on them barbers, settin' in a corner with his hands on his guns. Charley would come down from his saloon ever' so often and bring Mudhen a slug o' liquor an' a sandwich, and Mudhen even let the barbers eat a few sandwiches now an' agin.

After that day them barbers begun to look dirty-faced without bein' able to shave theirselves an' make theirselves look pretty. But that didn't make no difference to Mudhen.

Mudhen took the two of 'em back to the ranchhouse and set Geronimo to watch 'em again. An' Mudhen just went on an' et his sow-belly an' beans an' let them have the leavin's.

Next mornin', though, they was a surprise for the whole town down at the barber shop. The first customer to blow in was Lily. He took one look and backed out so fast that he stepped off the front porch with that peg leg an' busted his surcingle. Because instead of Grady an' Crawford bein' there, he seen Mudhen standin' by th' front chair. Mudhen had took off his catteridge belt an' turned it wrong side out an' was sharpenin' up a razor on it. Lily had had enough o' Mudhen's chin tailorin', I guess.

PRETTY soon they was a couple more customers an' Mudhen went to work. He explained that it was too much trouble watchin' them regular barbers all th' time when he had a man-eaten bulldog to do the work, so he decided to leave 'em at the ranch for a while. Besides, he said, he had watched 'em long enough to know everything they knew an' he could barber just as good as they could.

So he stayed there all day, what time he wasn't down at Charley's saloon, an' done a right smart bit o' business before he got through. Some said it wasn't such good barberin', but Mudhen said that was because they hadn't been shaved in so long their faces was tender, an' if they'd let him work on 'em a while they

would git so they could stand anything.

Some of 'em wasn't so sure about that, but then a man had to git shaved ever' two weeks or so.

Mudhen was havin' so much fun at it that he wouldn't bring Grady an' Crawford back. He was at the shop next day bright an' early. Lord, nobody could ever remember seein' him do so much work. An' even th' next day, an' th' next, there he was, grinin' from ear to ear.

THEN one mornin' that flea-bit cuss failed to come in. They was three punchers sat out in front o' the barber shop a hour till they blame near whittled up the hitchin'-rack, but he didn't show up.

Well, sir, along about the middle o' th' morning they was a devil of a commotion down th' road at the far end o' town that sounded like th' Mex'kin army comin' in sideways. Th' poker game broke up an' ever'body run out to listen.

They didn't have to listen long to know it was Mudhen. Nobody else around there would be settin' off his shootin' irons like that in daylight, not to mention after dark.

Th' sheriff wasn't nowhere in sight, so ever'body begun to look for holes to duck into when Mudhen would git close enough, because ever'body figgered he would be drunk as seventeen hundred an' forty-nine yappin' coyotes.

Th' first thing anybody could see was a cloud o' dust comin' down th' road. An' when it got closer you could see a couple o' hard-lookin' buzzards with black beards doin' a dog trot side by side. Their hands was tied behind 'em an' there was a couple o' ropes leadin' back to Mudhen, who was settin' on his cow-horse, pumpin' lead as fast as he could pull both triggers, an' reloadin' an' startin' in shootin' all over again.

At first they was so much dust that nobody couldn't see very well, but as soon as that funny procession got closer ever'body could tell that ol' Mudhen, for once in his life, wasn't drunk. He wasn't shootin' like he was enjoyin' it, but was just doin' some business-like pluggin' away right behind the heels o' them two hard coyotes.

Well, Mudhen hauled up in front o' Charley's saloon an' yelled for somebody to go in an git that there poster from behind th' bar. An' when it was brought out an' the dust had died down th' whole crowd let out a whoop.

They wasn't no mistakin' it. Mudhen had captured th' two rustlers that the sheriff was after.

"Now, git the sheriff," Mudhen yells. "I want all you punchers to witness that I git that reward. An' they'll be a real rip-snortin' party for the whole town when I do git it."

Th' sheriff come up just at that instant, ridin' at a high lope. He come chargin' in with two guns out an' ready to cut loose, but when he seen it was Mudhen who had been doin' all the shootin' he lowered his sights an' howled:

"WELL, I'll be a pigeon-toed hoss-fly! Where'd you ketch them critters? Them's the two, all right, an' it looks like I might have to take 'em off your hands."

"Yep, Sheriff," says Mudhen, "I knowed I'd got 'em. An' you can have 'em. They're too much trouble for me, anyways. Only remember, I want that there reward. Do I git it right away so's I could buy a drink for the bunch."

"You shore can have it," th' sheriff roars. "An' I'm mighty glad to advance anything up to twenty-five dollars right now just to git my hands on them rustlers."

"But wait a minute," Mudhen yelps, "you don't really want 'em for

a hour or so, do you, Sheriff? Because I want to show the boys something. You can come along an' see that they don' git away while I put on th' party. An' besides, I ain't had time to open up the barber shop yet. Come along, ever'body—an' tell Charley to git busy with some liquor, an' some beer for Lily."

A few more slugs at their heels sent them rustlers single-footin' down to the barber shop, with Mudhen still holdin' on to the rope an' the sheriff follerin' along, wonderin' what Mudhen was up to. An' when Mudhen got to the barber shop he got one o' th' boys to open the door an' he run them rustlers right in. Then he made one of 'em sit in each chair an' takin' his lass rope he tied 'em down tight.

"Now, Sheriff," says Mudhen, "I'm a-goin' to show a real slick job of shavin' these two coyotes. An' what's more, I think I'll do it without no soap. I've learned a lot o' tricks about barberin' since I started work in this here shop."

Mudhen grabs a couple o' stiff slugs of Charley's liquor, picks up his razor an' starts to work on th' first rustler. While he was scrapin' away at him an' th' rustler was hollerin' his head off, Mudhen went on talkin'.

"One o' th' things I learned while I was barberin' these last few weeks" he said, "was that a barber, if he gits a chance, can grow a beard just like anybody else. I wouldn't a-thought about it if I hadn't a-left them two out at the ranchhouse where they didn't have no chance to git prettied up, while I was doin' their work.

"But if you will begin to notice, as I git down this side o' this face, this here feller looks considerably like Jefferson Davis Grady. An' then, when I git through with this cuss, I'll show you a livin' model of one Robert E. Lee Crawford. An' this ain't no sleight o' hand pufformance, neither, Sheriff."

"Well, I'll be blamed to hellanback before breakfast," th' sheriff sings out. "Danged if you ain't right. An' here they was right under my nose all the time, an' nobody never would have took them for rustlers."

ABOUT that time Jim Crandall starts warmin' up on that tune about "Shave an' a haircut, fifteen cents," but th' sheriff cuts him off.

"You'll have to change the words to that song, Jim," he says. "This here's goin' to be a shave an' a haircut for five thousand good round genu-ine silver dollars, an' I'm-a-goin' to see to it that Mudhen gits ever' cent of it."

How Well Do You Know Your West?

Try to rope the answers for the following five questions. If you don't *savvy* 'em, turn to page 129, where the answers are given. Don't look first! Rate yourself twenty percent for each correct answer.

1. Name three famous songs of the West.

2. Why were Indians of the plains so furious against the buffalo hunters?

3. What is the difference between an arroyo and a coulee?

4. Who was Buckskin Frank?

5. In early pioneer days, was there a strong conflict between sheepmen and cattlemen?

Death Cards

Bob Frost, Outlaw, and a Pursuing Sheriff Both Land in the Same Boat as Mexican Hellions Pound on their Trail!

By CLAUDE RISTER

Author of "Land of Missing Men," "Deadly Guns," etc.

IN Pico Alazar's den of iniquity a mile below the Mexican line, sat Bob Frost, the outlaw. He was a broad-shouldered man with stabbing grey eyes and a cold, inscrutable face. Frost was bucking the proprietor's game of stud lone-handed, just as he had bucked the game of bank robbery in the town of Winchester the day before.

For more than two hours he had been sitting there at that same table, and now about half the loot he had taken in the holdup was neatly stacked at the right elbow of the tricky Mexican gambler.

"Wanz more I ween," Alazar observed softly, as he put out a slender hand and drew in the pot. A mechanical smile flitted across the thin olive-hued visage beneath the mountainous *sombrero.*

Frost said not a word, but his dagger-point eyes were staring fixedly, accusingly, at the man on the other side of the table. Frost's move seemed the most natural thing in the world—one of mere relaxation—as he leaned back and turned his chair slightly away from the table. A close observer would have noticed, however, that his right hand had gone down and was now resting curled up on his thigh, close to the butt of a holstered six-gun.

"Mabee these tam yor-re lock she change," consoled Alazar, as he started to shuffle.

"Ugh-uh, fella; not while yuh're dealin' them pasteboards, it won't."

The nimble brown fingers abruptly ceased to caress the cards. Black eyes peered sharply into grey ones. Only for an instant did the tableau endure, and then the mechanical smile returned to Pico's face. "I doan blam you for want the new deck, my frand. The ol' wan she trit you not so good. Hey, Carlos, bring us the new deck."

The cards were brought and placed before him. He picked them up and started to break the seal, but Frost stopped him.

"Ne'mind, I ain't playin' no more with none of yore cards," he snapped. "They're all factory marked. What I want is my money back, right *pronto.*"

Although he still had not made the slightest move, and his voice had been almost casual, greater consternation would not have been caused had he shouted his words.

For just a few seconds the room was filled with human statuary, and then those forms became suddenly animated. Tables and chairs were upset as men scrambled for cover. The next instant hell broke loose.

The boss of Del Montes was a flash with a six-gun, but so was Bob Frost. As the Mexican's darting right hand flipped a blunt six-gun

Frost's bullet scooted along Alazar's right jaw

from a holster, the muzzle of a Colt .45 magically appeared above the plane of the table and belched flame straight at his face.

Frost's bullet scooted along Alazar's right jaw, tearing up a red furrow and scraping the bone. It winged viciously on, to smash into a wall. The crafty card-shark had jerked his head to one side as he had struck for his gun, and the move had saved his life. He was only shocked into insensibility as he pitched to the floor.

Bob Frost swept the money and the unopened deck of cards into his hat; then backed to the door. He started to slither between the butterfly wings, but of a sudden he froze. A hand had fallen upon the collar of his shirt. A gun muzzle was boring against his spine.

"Easy, Frost!" a low voice cautioned. "Drop that shooter, before I uncouple yuh."

The desperado hesitated, and then he let his weapon fall. It struck with a soft thud.

"Where's yore hoss?" the mysterious stranger wanted to know.

"At the town corral."

"No time tuh go fer 'em," the hand on his collar spun him about. "*Pronto!* Hold ontuh that *dinero* an' fork my cayuse. We ain't got a secunt tuh lose. This here town will be a wasps' nest in another minute."

Although Frost's mind must have been full of questions at that moment, he gave voice to none of them. Already human forms were swarming onto the one short street of the town, and voices were shouting inquiries. A few swift strides carried

the outlaw to the waiting horse. He straddled leather, but even as he settled himself into the seat, his lanky captor was up behind him. Both men threw in their spurs, and the pony bolted like a startled antelope.

"Ride fer the Line," the man behind Frost ordered, and the desperado obeyed.

"Who are yuh?" Frost inquired.

The other chuckled and prodded him maliciously with a gun.

"Me? Oh, I'm jest that there decrepit ol' sheriff yuh thought yuh'd dodged over on the other side," he laughed.

Frost grunted, was silent for a moment.

"What about this stuff?" he said then, as he shook the hatful of money.

"Yuh're gonna hold ontuh her until we git tuh the county seat; then you'll turn her over tuh me. I'll send it back tuh the bank at Winchester."

Again silence, while the pony hammered along.

"Listen, Sheriff," the outlaw broke out, "yuh ain't got nothing against me personal. Now, yuh're gettin' no younger mighty fast, an' there's no money in yore office. Supposin' me an' yuh split this here *dinero*—"

"Stop that kinda talk, Bob Frost, before I wrap my gun barrel over yore haid!"

They flashed across the Line. Old Luke Townley, sheriff of Mesquite County, reached around his prisoner, took hold of the reins, and pulled the horse to a stop. For just a few seconds he listened.

"I thought so," the lanky officer groaned. "They're comin' after us hell for hackamore! That fella, Alazar, wasn't out long from his jaw wound. Them wolves won't pay no more attention tuh the Border than if it didn't exist. I hate tuh tell yuh what'll happen tuh yuh if they catch us. Alazar was mighty proud of that han'some face the Mex gals rave so much about, an' now yuh've done gone an' spoiled it. Yes siree, if they overtake us—"

He released his grip of the reins, roweled the horse anew, and ordered his captive to follow the Black Mesa trail.

"Yeh," Bob Frost said dryly, "they'll make short work of the two of us if they run us down. Soon as they sight us they'll start shootin', 'cause plumb naturally they'll figure you're some pal of mine. If yuh stop an' explain, they'll murder yuh anyway, for right now they're all het up, an' they hate John Laws. Furthermore, Alazar has a personal grudge agin yuh for juggin' his half-brother a year ago. Best thing yuh can do, ol'-timer, is drop me off somewhere in the bresh, an' get all yuh can out of this here already tired cayuse of yoren. Carryin' single he might be able tuh—"

"I ain't settin' yuh free, an' I ain't stoppin' tuh explain. I'm ridin' with yuh fer Black Mesa, an' if them coyotes crowd me, I'll fight. That's all they is to it."

AND crowd they did. Soon vague shadows appeared out of the darkness behind. Sending an occasional glance over one shoulder, old Luke Townley saw that they were drawing steadily nearer. Another minute, and fire-flowers began blooming in the black garden of the night. The two fugitives heard the vicious whip and whine of flying lead.

"Got another gun on yuh?" Frost wanted to know.

"Maybe; why?"

"I could help yuh stop them hellers."

"Not much! Besides, what chance would two men with sixes have agin a whole band armed with rifles?"

"Well, then, wha're we gonna do?"

"Leave this trail an' make fer the county seat by way of Grey Desert. I reckon that move'll fool 'em. They won't be expectin' it."

They had put a dry wash and a broad strip of brush between them and their pursuers, and now Luke Townley again reached around the other man and grasped the reins. He swung the horse from the trail, and headed the animal toward a vast stretch of wastelands which lay in the distance like a shadowy expanse of rolling sea.

"It's a big chance," Frost said uneasily. "There ain't a drop of water in all that hell-garden."

"I've got enough in the canteen here on my saddle tuh carry us through."

"Yeah, providin' nothin' happens, but supposin' we should find ourselves afoot, or caught in a duster? This is the sandstorm season, yuh know, and Grey Desert is havin' about two-three of 'em a week."

"Maybe yuh'd ruther wait here an' say howdy tuh Pico Alazar an' his riders?" Luke suggested sarcastically. Frost did not reply.

THE first crack of dawn found the two men far out upon the melancholy wastes of Grey Desert. They had seen no more of their pursuers.

The faint, grey light of morning revealed a scene of depressing loneliness. It seemed that the two men and their horses were alone within a dead world. Wave beyond wave, an ocean of dreary dunes rolled about them. Desert shrubs were like so many ghosts of the night, crouched, peering curiously. Overhead a pallid half-moon stared at them from a cloudless sky.

It was obvious to both men that a sandstorm was imminent. The air had become close and musty. Occasional puffs of wind sprang suddenly from nowhere, and sent little dust-devils spinning fantastically along the backs of groundswells.

"We're in for it," growled Frost. "She's comin' a duster, shore 'nough, an' our ride ain't more than half finished."

"We'll have tuh lay up somewhere for a while," Luke said quietly. "Our hoss is plumb tuckered out, an' besides, a fella can't ride in a desert sandstorm. See that tiny mesa way off yonder in the darkness? We'll take shelter agin its off-weather side, an' stay there until the wind has laid an' our mount has rested. We'll git th'ough all right, although of course both us an' the hoss are gonna be mighty thirsty before we reach the county seat."

They rode on; were just topping a long sand-billow, when of a sudden they were electrified by a sharp snap that was like the pop of a firecracker. Frost swore softly. Luke flung a glance to the rear, and once more saw fire-roses blossoming in the darkness.

"Hell's hinges!" the old officer exclaimed. "They shore are determined! Doped out our move an' come on after us! We're in for it now!"

Desperately they swerved, and dodged among the sandhills, but they could not shake off their tenacious pursuers. Pico Alazar was burning with a desire for revenge and a resolve to recover the money which had been swept from his gambling table.

That money was still being carried by Bob Frost, in his greasy old hat. Luke was of a mind that his prisoner might as well perform that chore, since he, himself, was pretty busy holding a gun against the man's back.

Very soon the pony's breath was coming in heavy gasps, and its gallop was rocking and stilted. Obviously the creature could not go much farther.

"Our only hope is the sandstorm," Frost observed grimly. "Why don't she hurry an' bust?"

Luke anxiously scanned the heav-

ens. A dark veil was drifting across the half-moon. He could hear a faint moaning in the distance, and he knew that it was caused by wind rushing over groundswells. He looked back once more at the pursuing shadows, measured the distance, calculated the time, wondered.

Bob Frost guided the sobbing, quivering horse around the base of a low, dome-shaped hillock, and then of a sudden it happened! The animal's legs crumpled and it went down as if shot through the head, although in reality not a bullet had touched the poor brute. The two riders were catapulted through the air, and sent scooting. The pony flopped, with a soft slapping of saddle leather, and did not get up.

Frost rose to a sitting position. He was still hugging the hatful of money. He saw Luke Townley scrambling on hands and knees, up a side of the hillock.

Prone on the crest of the mound of sand, the old officer saw that already the charging cavalcade was almost upon him and his prisoner. He pulled a gun from the holster at his side, and another from under his shirt.

"All right, dang yuh!" he muttered. "If it's fight yuh want, come an' git 'er!"

The two six-guns began bucking and roaring and flaming.

The attackers had not seen the horse collapse or the lanky man slither up to the crest of the sand-hill; therefore, they were taken completely by surprise. The precipitate charge halted abruptly. For a moment there was confusion, and then the riders began scattering for the shelter of nearby dunes. The next instant every one of those scurrying forms was blotted out by a rolling cloud of dust.

Luke heard a mirthless laugh, and glancing aside he saw Frost, sprawled near him.

"That'll hold 'em for a while!" the outlaw exulted.

"Yeah, a very little while. Soon as they recover from their shock, they'll start movin' tuh surround—"

Luke broke into a cough. By this time dust was drifting everywhere, like a black fog rolling over a midnight sea. The two men drew their scarfs up to their eyes.

Off in the gritty gloom rifles began barking. The invisible enemy was firing blindly toward the spot from which had come the shots that had stopped the charge. Perhaps the gang was acting only out of a spirit of vengefulness. Perhaps, again, the shooting was designed to disguise a circling movement.

"Le's get outa here," Frost mumbled through his mask, "before they th'ow a loop around us."

The sheriff nodded. They got to their feet and started down the hillock.

Off in the dirt and the gloom, rifles were still cracking spitefully.

Luke Townley took just two steps, and then it seemed to him that a sledgehammer fell out of the heavens and struck his head. Sparks flew before his eyes, vanished; his brain vibrated; and then black oblivion piled upon him.

WHEN he regained consciousness, he was sprawled within the meager shelter of a clump of bushes that grew on the side of a groundswell. Gloom still lay upon the desert, for the oncoming sun was yet deep beneath the eastern horizon. The sandstorm was blowing with full fury. The half-moon was a lusterless, oblong plaque, affixed to a dirty sky.

His head was aching. He put up a hand, and was surprised when he touched a bandage. Remembrance came with a rush. Squatted near him was a man—Bob Frost! The sheriff blinked and squinted amazed.

"What happened?" he wanted to know.

"One of them random bullets scratched the back of yore head an' knocked yuh out," Frost explained, speaking in a muffled tone. "I packed yuh until I got tired. Reckon we don't need tuh worry no more about Alazar an' his wolf-gang. This blow sent 'em skeedaddlin' for Del Montes."

The old sheriff eyed the desperado queerly.

"Thanks, Frost; yuh're white, even if yuh are an outlaw. Yuh could have taken the money, the guns an' the water an' gone it alone." He nodded toward the canteen which Frost now carried. "'Nough left in there tuh take one man outa this hell-hole, even without a cayuse."

"I wouldn't leave a wounded coyote tuh die like that," Frost declared curtly. He got up, came closer. "If yuh're able tuh travel, we'll start trugglin' along tuhward that little mesa yuh pointed out jest before the storm busted. It's plumb hell out here in this sand-blastin'."

Frost assisted Luke to rise, helped him to walk, and they set off through the darkness and the blinding, biting, drilling grit.

OUT there amidst the desert wastes and the awful tempest of sand, the two men were like spirits astray within some weird shadow-world. Unseen hands tugged at their clothing. The dirt-laden gloom was filled with invisible devils that screamed and laughed, and howled, and wailed, and moaned. Myriad particles of sand created a sinister hissing sound as they crawled incessantly along the ground. Line after line, the black storm cavalry came whooping and charging across the dunes.

After what to Luke Townley seemed hours of plodding, struggling, they reached a tiny mesa which stood like an isolated cathedral amidst the grey desert wastes. They found a sheltered pocket within a sandstone cliff, and there they settled down to await the abatement of the storm.

As daylight came and time dragged on, the two men talked, and as they talked each was brought to an understanding of the other's viewpoint. Luke saw behind the mask of a notorious outlaw. Frost viewed the heart and the mind beneath the iron exterior of a man who for thirty years had been a peace officer.

Frost came to realize that the law is not always hard; that it is not wholly without pity. That after all, there must be law; that even desperadoes have some sort of code.

Luke Townley learned that a man may still possess a noble heart, even though he has traveled far along the outlaw trail. That any fair-minded person could easily understand how circumstances might cause a good horse, especially a mettlesome one, to turn bronc.

Take Frost, for instance. He once had been an honest, hard-working young ranchman; but a bank had cheated him, cleaned him out, robbed him in a way that was lawful. The spirited young fellow had fought back in the only way he knew how, with a six-gun. He had robbed that same bank, in a way that was unlawful.

The code of the land—ironically—had decreed that the bank had been within its right, but that Bob Frost had made of himself a desperado. Once embarked upon the outlaw trails, Frost had reasoned that there could be no turning back, and so he had traveled on and on.

Not that Luke Townley excused the man; but at least he could understand.

About midday, the wind ceased; died almost as suddenly as it had sprung up. A dead calm settled over

the melancholy wastes, but the atmosphere was still thick with dust.

The two men lowered their scarfs, and for a minute they regarded each other in silence. Both faces were grotesquely mottled. They were grim, too, those visages, the stony one of the outlaw, and the leathery one of the old officer. Both men realized that a crisis was at hand. Each was wondering what action the other would take.

Luke's gaze drifted down to his guns, now in the possession of the other man. One was within the holster at Frost's right hip. The other protruded from the outlaw's waistband.

Without a word, Bob Frost reached behind him and picked up the hatful of money which he had brought to the desert refuge. He set the hat between him and the sheriff, and then he drew the gun from his waistband and laid it upon the money.

Silently Luke took the gun and shoved it into his own hip-holster. He squinted his brown eyes, cocked his head to one side, and for another moment studied Bob Frost intently. All the while his bony fingers were gently twisting and pulling the strands of his drooping mustache.

"Well," he drawled finally, "what now?"

He had asked the question not because he was unable to make a decision in that moment of crisis, but to draw out the other man. It was the checking of a bet, to ascertain what the other fellow would do.

Bob Frost did not hesitate. His voice was almost staccato.

"Don't bluff, Sheriff! Yuh know very well that only one of us is goin' out of this hell-hole alive. There ain't enough water here for the two of us." He indicated the canteen which was slung over his left shoulder, and then he took off the container and set it down beside the hatful of money.

Old Luke Townley nodded soberly, continued to finger his drooping mustache.

"Yeah, I reckon that's right, Frost," he agreed. "The question is, which one of us gits it?"

Again he had checked the bet. Now, what would Frost do?

Although no outward sign showed that he was in the least excited, in reality old Luke Townley's lank body was tense from toes to fingertips. What was the meaning of that strange light in the desperado's steely eyes? What thoughts were in the man's mind? Had Frost decided that they should fight a duel to the death, and that the survivor thereof should take the water, the money and the guns?

BOB FROST turned his gaze across the desert solitude. Sitting there, hands clasped over knees, he spoke in a detached voice.

"Luke Townley, yuh're a good citizen; besides, yuh've got a wife an' two grown-up children tuh live for," he said. "Now me, I'm jest a worthless outlaw, travelin' on the ragged aidge of death all the time. If I don't die with my boots on tuhday, I will some other day."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning yuh take the water, an' —yes, the *dinero*. What use is money to a dead man?"

"Yuh're a queer one, Bob Frost," the lean old officer told him. "Dogged if yuh ain't! Yuh'd give me the one chance tuh escape, an' stay here yorese'f tuh face certain death from thirst!"

"Slightly wrong," said Frost. "I'd have a gun, remember."

Once more they gazed steadily at each other, and then Luke Townley shook his head.

"Well, what then?" Frost broke out sharply.

"I dunno," Luke confessed, "but yuh're as much entitled tuh that lone chance as I am. We ain't no longer sheriff an' outlaw, Frost, but jest two equal men, lookin' at death from the same point."

Bob Frost dug a hand into the hatful of coins and bills, and brought out the packet of cards he had swept from Alazar's gambling table along with the money. He broke the seals and, with a quick gesture, spread the pasteboards face downward on the sand.

"It would be plumb foolish for us both tuh die here on the desert, when there's a good chance for one of us to get out," he reasoned swiftly, earnestly. "Why not let the cards decide? The man who draws low, will go. The one who draws high, will stay an' face death alone."

The sheriff hesitated, but finally he admitted that Frost was right; that it would be foolish for them to share their meager water supply and die together, when there was a chance for one man to get out of the desert.

"All right, then, let's get it over with," urged Frost. "Choose yore card," he motioned toward the arc of pasteboards on the ground.

In solemn silence they drew. Luke's card was the ten of diamonds. Frost's was the ace of spades. The outlaw made a gesture of surrender.

"Well, that means yuh go," he said decisively.

He whipped off his scarf, spread it upon the ground, emptied the money onto it, and made a neat bundle. He tied the bandanna about his neck to replace the scarf. Then, picking up canteen and the bundle of money, he thrust them into Luke's arms. Both men rose.

"Better get goin', old-timer," Frost said. "Every minute yuh spend here lessens yore chances jest that much."

"But doggonit, Frost, I—I cain't go through with this thing! Last night yuh stuck by me. Said yuh couldn't leave even a crippled coyote tuh die on the desert. Well, I'm feelin' the same way right now."

Bob Frost drew his gun.

"Luke," he said resolutely, "I'm goin' tuh stop yore argyin' by walkin' away from here. If yuh foller me, I'll have tuh settle the question by shovin' the muzzle of this gun against my head an' pullin' the trigger. If yuh leave me alone, I'll keep travelin', an' there's a dim chance I may get out of this here hell-hole, too. Maybe so I'll meet up with some desert traveler. Maybe so I'll run across some barrel cactus that'll keep me alive until I can reach water. So-long!"

He turned and started striding swiftly away. Luke called after him, but Frost paid no heed. The sheriff did not follow. He had not a doubt that if he did so, Bob Frost would carry out the threat he had made.

Sadly the old sheriff turned his leathery face toward the north, and started his long hike. He did not like the thing he was doing, but he saw no alternative. He told himself that he would make all possible speed, and that as soon as he had reached safety, he would organize a searching party and start back to look for Bob Frost.

THE flaming sun finally burned itself out. Luke Townley continued his weary trek until past midnight, and then he threw himself down upon a bed of sand for a few hours' rest and sleep. He was up again with the dawn and plodding doggedly onward.

About mid-morning he saw, far ahead of him, moving figures amidst the quivering heat-waves. A long, deployed line of riders was moving toward the heart of the desert. He stopped abruptly, as a bolt of uneasiness shot straight to his heart. The thought which had flashed into

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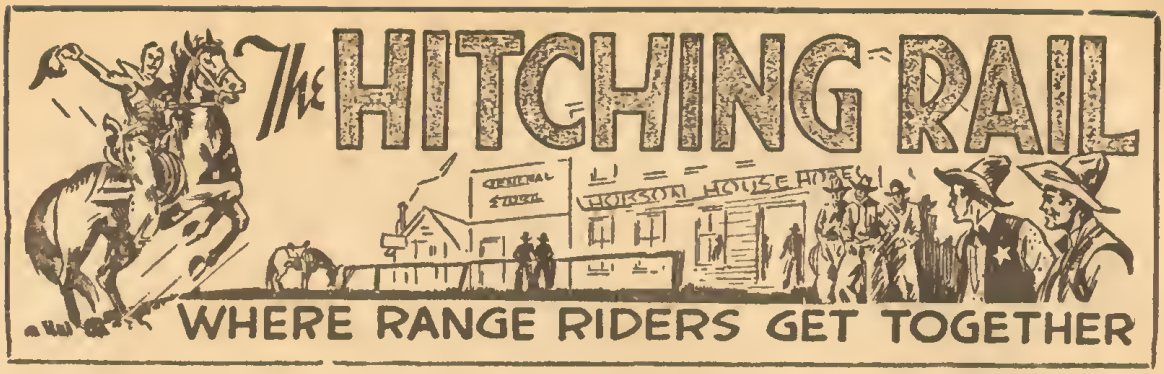

YES, SUH, folks, it's jest like my ol' cowpoke pal, Shorty Hall, down Arizony way, writ me few days ago—gittin' some blazin' warm in th' ol' desert these days an' cowboys an' broncs is asweatin' some, plenty, circlin' cows an' brandin' rest o' th' Spring calves an' lookin' fer strays 'mongst th' foothills. But cain't noway expect nothin' else, come July, kin we, fellas an' gals? An' yet, I'm talkin' plumb truthful, I done seen real snow in July. Yes, suh, that's a fact.

We was all ridin' circle on th' Ogallala ranch, what's up 'long th' Platte River in Wyomin'. Chuck waggin out an' our strings o' broncs bein' nice mothered hy a young Mex wrangler we knowed as Tony.

They's Got All Sortsa Names

Ef he ever had a last name, we didn't never hear it. But that's not queer, out in th' cow country, where fellas drifts a heap an' gits called by all sortsa names, mostly short ones like "Slim," "Bud," "Soapy," "Shorty," "Two-gun," an' them sorta titles. Well, we all rid durned hard that bright, sunny day, chasin' cow critters everywheres an' tryin' tuh hunch 'em down on th' flats jest west o' Douglas, what was then jest a wide spot in th' road an' ev'ry other shack a saloon or gamhlin' emporium where yuh spends yore *dinero* free an' hearty, an' nohody's business. Sun ashinin' bright that day, warm on yore back, an' th' whole world lookin' shore fine.

'Bout four o'clock we all comes lopin' back tuh th' chuck waggin, what ol' Lod Littleton was adrivin' an' acookin', an' he's got a dandy meal all right there for th' takin'. Nothin' tuh do hut grah tin-pan, tin-cup an' them table weapons an' dig in.

Them Mournful Range Songs

Ev'rybody feelin' cockeyed good an' th' trail boss actually asingin', what he didn't do of'en. We throws down our soogans 'round th' waggin after gruhbin' our share, gits our smokes agoin', tries admirin' th' trail boss's deep, croaky voice as he sings some o' them mournful range songs, an' feels we're aridin' high an' happy after th' past hard winter. Bones an' muscles we ain't had thawed out fer months is workin' ag'in like yuh'd greased 'em from ol' Lod's wagon-box can. Camp fires aflickerin' friendly, too. Moon, she comes asnoopin' up bright an' round like a ball o' Colorady silver. Then we all crawls inside our soogans an' leaves our boots settin' clost beside th' haid o' our hlankets, ready fer quick jerkin' on ef anything happened. Pays fer cowhoys holdin' a cattle herd tuh be prepared, come night time.

A Snowstorm, July 28!

I reckon, after all that day's hard ridin' among th' hills, that that there Wyomin' night heerd a plenty loud snores right soon, hut ain't nohody carin', jest willin' tuh rest our haids on our saddles an' call it a day. Musta been 'bout four in th' mawnin' when ev'ryhody busts awake an' sits up *pronto.* An' down had come a real snowstorm, July 28th! A good eight inches was coverin' us all. Our herd gits sorta groanin' like it might stampede on us an' we all gits outa our soogans an' starts shovin' our dogs inside our stiffened, snow-covered hoots, an' then that Wyomin' air shore filled with wild cuss-words, fer ev'ry fella's boots was plumh filled with th' cold, wet snow, top tuh bottom. An' some dawggonned *hombre* had packed that snow down inside o' our boots till it was like ice.

We up-ended them hoots, swearin' real natural, slammed 'em ag'in anything within reach, hatted 'em with our fists, afore we could git that snow out, an' then th' insides was shore durned cold tuh a fella's warm feet. Me, I squinted 'round tuh see some face atwitchin' with guilt, an' there was that young night wrangler, Tony, sittin' his dun-colored bronc hack near th' chuck-waggin, alaffin', like he'd been tuh one o' them musikal comedies we reads ahout in th' Sunday editions—when we got one handy, months old.

Looked Like a Snow-Man

Didn't take us fellas long tuh roll that young Mex in th' snow till he shore looked like a snow-man what th' kids likes tuh make. An' all th' time, our durned dawgs was afreezin' in our cold boots an' th' snow left inside 'em meltin' as we warmed up an' feelin' like a good swaller o' red-eye'd have tuh be passed around afore we could stand steady. Our trail boss, he seen ev'rything *that* time, fer onct, as a joke.

Tony hadn't dared fillin' *his* boots with no snow. An' then th' miracle o' th' range comes, makin' our eyes poke out foot-an'-a-half, fer th' boss, he drug out a full bottle

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o' good ol' Cyrus-Noble whiskey an' passed round free an' han'some. Boys, gals, we'd 'a' follered that there trail boss clean tuh th' moon, after that.

Then he tells us tuh git ridin' round th' restless herd tuh quiet 'em down. Luck was with us, an' them critters went back tuh bed right soon, though some kept standin' all night an' showin' signs o' hatin' wet snow. Tony, he shore kept outa our way th' rest o' th' night, but we got even with 'im next mawnin', what broke sunny an' clear. We made 'im ride a half-broke bronc, bareback, clean tuh th' ranch an' bring back a fresh bottle o' that Cyrus-Noble fer th' boss. An' ridin' without his boots! Four miles each way, an' a nice snow-covered desert tuh cross. But I'll shore hand it tuh that Mex kid. He made it an' comes back agrinnin'—an' with *two* bottles. An' he'd wrapped gunny sacks round his feet.

But it's warm now, I'll tell th' world. Boss, he's asittin' 'crost th' room without no coat or vest an' spongin' his face with coupla bath towels an' mutterin' things I cain't hear. Ef he's cussin' th' weather, I wisht he'd talk a little louder.

Lotsa New Members

Folks, we're shore gittin' lotsa new members enrolled in our RANGE RIDERS' CLUB, an' they're comin' in all th' way from Californy tuh Maine, with some even from Australia an' other cannibal lands.

Jest goes tuh show we got a real boss what's capturing' th' world with all these danged fine stories from real riders o' th' cow country. An' our SWAP COUNTER is growin' nice an' plenty fast, with room fer heaps more swappers sendin' us their dope as tuh what they wanta swap. Git writin' in, folks.

Cowboys in Hawaii

Yere's a nice letter from Alice Lake, what's jest come back from visitin' on th' island o' Hawaii, where's some o' th' biggest cattle ranches ever knowed. Real cowboys, American an' native, an' lass-ropes aswingin' right expert. I been there, Alice. an' that country's as pretty as yore photygraf; same sweet glow as lays on yore cheeks an' shows in yore brown eyes, all asmilin' at me way I likes. Alice wants tuh know 'bout what we calls "saddle galls" an' "cinch sores," says she's been seein' a heap of 'em over on them Hawaiian ranches.

Alice, they're mean things tuh cure. Saddle galls comes on yore hoss's back from bad-fittin' saddles, dirty saddle blankets, creased saddle blankets what don't lay smooth, an' also comes from a rider's slumpin' tuh one side on a long ride, thus throwin' too much weight on one side or th' other o' his kak.

A bad, neglected saddle sore, often on th' bronc's withers (top o' th' shoulders)

(Continued on page 122)

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(Continued from page 120)

is apt tuh run intuh a permanent "fistula" an' ruin a good hoss ferever. Treatment: Stop ridin' th' hoss. Wash sore with warm water until clean. Apply a liniment like as follows: The white of an egg mixed with alcohol makes a very good dressing after sore has been washed clean. This is always handy tuh git.

Oxide ointment should be used, as follows: Oxide of zinc, 1 part, added to cosmoline, 10 parts. Yuh kin git this at any drugstore, an's fine. Sometimes such saddle galls comes on some other part o' a hoss's back, where th' saddle sits. Treat such galls th' same way. An' leave th' hoss's galls tuh git well afore yuh rides 'im ag'in. Ef yuh MUST ride th' hoss, say tuh home, then cut out a circular hole in yore saddle blanket over th' gall, thus removin' pressure on th' sore.

Cinch Sores

Cinch sores comes under yore cinch, usually clost behind yore hoss's front laigs, mebbe on one side, mebbe on both sides. Causes: Dirty or too tight cinches, long hard rides in hot weather, pinchin' th' skin when cinchin', loungin' in yore saddle at expense o' yore hoss. Much fast an' hard ropin' kin cause these sores, an' they're hard tuh cure. Use same treatment as fer them saddle galls, Alice, an' give yore hoss plenty time fer 'em tuh heal up complete afore yuh rides ag'in.

Well, who's next? Looks like Johnny Balentine, o' Chicago, gits his chanct.

The Border Patrol

Johnny asks how he kin join up with th' Border Patrol down in th' Southwest, th' force what rides th' Mex border an' gits in a heap o' gun-slingin' scraps. They're shore a fine bunch o' fellas, Johnny, an' none of 'em's anybody's fool. Yuh kin git full information by writin' straight tuh Colonel H. C. Horsley, Commander, Border Patrol, El Paso, Texas, as fine a fella as ever wore high-heeled boots or smoked a five-cent seegar.

Ef he had a nickel fer every shot what's been fired at 'im by badmen an' smugglers along th' Rio Grande, an' shoved 'em all in his jeans' pockets, he could drown in a bathtub. Yuh'll find th' life right excitin', Johnny. Me, I rode three years on th' Cavalry Border Patrol down New Mexico an' Arizona way, an' look back tuh them years as grand ones, an' no kiddin'.

Each "rookie" goes through a course o' trainin', an' it's SOME trainin', son. Criminal Law, Court Procedure, Conduct and duties as Border Patrol Rider, Line Patrolling, Identification Work. Care and Use of Firearms an' high qualification required in same; Spanish, and many other things before he becomes a full-fledged rider of the wild country along th' Rio Grande an' points farther west. Very superior physical health and eyesight are prime requi-

(Continued on page 128)

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DEATH CARDS

(Continued from page 117)

his mind was that the gang from Del Montes had thrown out a sweeping dragnet to catch him and Bob Frost.

Luke had stopped on the crest of a huge groundswell. It quickly became evident that at least one of the horsemen had sighted him. Faintly to his ears came three shots, fired in rapid succession—the old range signal for attention. The riders broke into a gallop and came converging toward the spot where he stood.

The sheriff's brain worked fast. It would be useless for him to run or to hide. Those men would quickly round him up. On the other hand, he could not hope to wage a successful fight against such odds. He decided that he would try to bluff his way out of the situation.

No one in Del Montes had known who it was had ridden out of town with Bob Frost. He would say that he had met up with Frost and another man, mounted double. That they had robbed him of his horse, and then had ridden away toward the west. It was a good plan. It ought to work. He might even be able to bargain for a horse and some water. If he could, he would swing back and go to Frost's rescue, as soon as he could get out of sight of the searching band.

His decision formed, he moved straight ahead to meet the oncoming riders.

Old Luke's heart bounded for joy a few minutes later, when he saw that the mounted band was not Alazar's wolf-pack, after all, but a posse led by his own chief deputy. Questions flew back and forth as his friends gathered about him.

"When yuh phoned from Gibson's ranch about the holdup," the deputy explained, "an' that yuh was ridin' alone tuh cut the robber's trail, I or-

(Continued on page 126)

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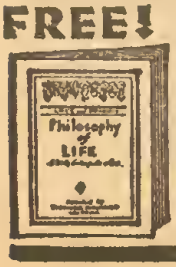

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(Continued from page 124)

ganized a posse an' we headed straight south. Over near Lobo Peak we met up with a Mex rider who said he'd talked with yuh, an' that yuh'd likely gone intuh Del Montes. I sent a spy down there"—he nodded toward a young Mexican in his party—"an' he found out what had happened. When I learned that yuh an' Frost had disappeared in Grey Desert, I was uneasy for youh, so we come up here an' started dragnettin'."

Luke told what had happened to him and the outlaw. He then got up behind one of riders, and the party set out to look for Frost.

It was late in the day when they arrived at the place where Luke and Frost had taken refuge from the sandstorm. The cards were still spread out on the ground. All were lying face downward save two—the ten of diamonds and the ace of spades.

AGAIN Luke told them how he and Frost had gambled for the water and for life. The young Mexican dismounted and studied the cards briefly. When he looked up, there was a peculiar smile on his lips.

"Frost, he cheat you, *senor*," he told Luke.

"What? How's that?"

"These cards they are mark, like all which Pico Alazar deal."

"Yuh — yuh mean — Frost drawed the death card deliberate?"

The youth shrugged.

"He mus' could read the cards, for it was because he discover they are mark, that he and Alazar they shoot."

"Well, I'll be dag-nabbed!" exclaimed Luke.

He had not known before what had caused the shooting in Del Montes, but had taken it for granted that Frost had robbed Alazar's dive.

They took up the trail. It led them first to the half-picked carcass

of a horse, and then straight southward, toward Mexico.

"Pore cuss," said Luke. "I reckon he had a faint hope maybe that hoss wasn't dead when we left it, an' that the critter was up an' able tuh travel. Maybe, again, he wanted a piece of the meat tuh chaw on."

Darkness soon came, but the searchers pressed on. The sky was clear; the half-moon was silvery; and the footprints in the sand could be plainly seen. All night long the posse followed the trail.

Although he was nearly exhausted from physical exertion and lack of sleep, old Luke Townley had refused to halt, even for an hour's rest. That Bob Frost could have traveled so far without a drop of water, was something to marvel at.

The tracks in the sand told a grim story. At first the stride had been long and even, but finally it had become meandering. Little scars showed where boot-toe had dragged.

It was about the middle of a torrid morning, when finally they came upon Bob Frost. He was sprawled in the shade of a clump of bushes.

"Thank the Lord!" the gaunt old sheriff mumbled hoarsely, when he found that the man was alive.

As soon as the outlaw was able to sit up and talk, he explained how it was that he had been able to come such a long way before collapsing. He had taken a little water from the stomach of the horse, and it had sustained him until he had reached the place where he had been found.

His cracked lips twisted in a grin when Luke told him it had been discovered that the cards were marked.

"Well, yuh see, Sheriff, I figured that with the water I could get from the hoss, I'd have nearly as good a chance as yuh," he said.

"Don't try tuh make it appear yuh didn't do somethin' noble. It was one of the finest acts I ever heard

(Concluded on page 129)

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IN THE JULY ISSUE

Novels by Stephen Payne, Miles Overholt, Tom Gunn, Forbes Parkhill and Lee Bond

15c AT ALL STANDS

THE HITCHING RAIL

(Concluded from page 122)

sites, as well as keen hearin'. More than half of all recent recruits are law school graduates and have college degrees. Almost *all* are university men. Riding, o' course, is taught thoroughly.

Well, folks, time's up ag'in. But we'll be seein' yuh ag'in next month. In th' meantime, don't overlook readin' th' top-notch yarn in this yere number, GUN-SLINGIN' MAVERICK, by one o' th' best cow country writers ever knowed, LEE BOND; an' then go on right through an' don't skip a single durned yarn. Every one's been hand-picked and'll hold yuh roped tuh th' last word. An' watch out fer our August number. It's gonna be a real round-up o' top-hands. Jest lissen tuh these names, then yuh'll know an' be out early tuh git yore copy: Wilton West, Syl MacDowell, Cliff Walters, Grant Taylor, James W. Egan, an' others. Startin' off with WILTON WEST'S grand gallopin' novel, BIG BEND BUCKAROOS, that packs a thrill in every line! And don't overlook the Hooker Bros. howler by Grant Taylor.

Gotta git ridin' now, fellas an' gals. Th' boss an' Blondie's jest sneakin' out fer lunch an' I gotta foller clost an' look like I'm jest admirin' th' sky. Then th' boss'll say, "Hola, Buck, come join us fer lunch," an' all I gotta do is tuh nod an' smile—an' know he's gonna foot th' meal ticket ag'in. I shore got clever ways, folks. Well, *adios, amigos. Bueno salud!*

Buck Benson

APPLICATION 7-35

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300 Prizes

Write to Mr. Jim Thayer, Dept. 586 The Crowell Publishing Co., Springfield, Ohio

Get This Bike

DEATH CARDS

(Concluded from page 127)

of. Too bad a fella sech as yuh ever turned outlaw, Bob Frost. Now an ol' rancher friend of mine down in Senora could use a man like yuh. Why don't yuh go down there an' start life anew, the right way?"

Frost was surprised.

"Why, I'd be plumb proud to, but—ain't yuh goin' tuh arrest me?"

There was a twinkle in the sheriff's brown eyes.

"Nope, I ain't got no right tuh arrest yuh, Bob," he grinned.

"No right! How come?"

"I guess yuh ain't noticed yit, jest how far south yuh managed tuh stagger. Right now we're about three hundred yards below the United States-Mexican line."

Frost turned his head and gazed toward the north. Then his eyes returned to Luke, and he stuck out a hand. Both men were grinning understandingly as they shook.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

(See Page 109)

1. Any of the following—Jesse James, The Dying Cowboy, The Chisholm Trail, Song of the Night Herd, Ballad of Utah Carroll, Goodbye Old Paint, Zebra Dun, Roy Bean, Cowboy Jack and The Great Roundup.

2. Buffalo meant to the Indians of the plains—food, fuel and many other necessities of life.

3. An arroyo is a small stream or its dry bed; a coulee is a deep gulch, usually dry.

4. Buckskin Frank was the nickname of Frank Leslie, one of the most dreaded gun fighters of Tombstone, Arizona.

5. No. Conflict began only after available rangeland grew limited and the market for sheepmen's products widened.

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- The Truth About Abuse

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- Joys of Perfect Mating
- What to Allow a Lover to do
- Intimate Feminine Hygiene
- Prostitution
- Birth Control Chart
- How to Attract and Hold Men
- Sexual Slavery of Women
- Essentials of Happy Marriage
- The Sex Organs

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I am amazed at Vacu-matic performance. It's giving me 5 more miles per gallon.—Walter Zielinski, Ill.

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I installed both Vacu-matics and they work excellent. On my own V8 Ford I notice wonderful performance in pickup, get-away and gas saving. — Butt Burnett, Mich.

BUICK
Everything you claim about Vacu matic is true. I now get 20 miles to the gallon. Before I was only averaging 15¼ miles.— C. Constantino, Fla.

FRANKLIN
With Vacu-matic I have increased my mileage from 10.1 to 14.2 miles per gallon. I figure I save over $75.00 a year in gasoline.— R. K. Radtke. Wis.

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On my Plymouth 6 I obtained an average of 22 miles per gal lon, an increase of 7 miles. This means a saving of $15 a month or $180 a year. F S. Peck, Calif.

CHEVROLET
Please send me a Vacu-matic for a Mo del A. The mileage on my 1933 Chevrolet jumped from 18 to 22 miles per gal. with Vacu-matic. — Paul P. Haas, Mass.

ALL WELL PLEASED
Enclosed find order for 12 more. Everyone I have sold is giving from 4 to 6 more miles per gallon. I have 3 more orders for V8 Ford. Every body is well pleased.—J. O. Carll, Texas.

MODEL A FORD
Have been using the Vacu-matic for a month. I used to get 20 to 22 miles per gal. Now I get 30 to 33 miles. It is amazing the difference it makes.—James W. Barr, Canada.

NASH
On my Advanced 6 Nash gained 17½% in mileage. The car will idle down to 3 miles an hour and then take gas without a complaint. — J. Showalter, Mo.

DODGE
Just completed 2310 miles on 92 gallons in my 1933 Dodge 6. This figures 25 miles while before I averaged only 20 miles per gal. on trips. — Al Fruzyna, Calif.

OLDSMOBILE
I am well pleased with Vacu-matic on our Oldsmobile. A test proved it to give 18 miles per gal. Before we considered 13 good. — Arthur Williams, N. Y.

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited letters received from Vacu-matic users.

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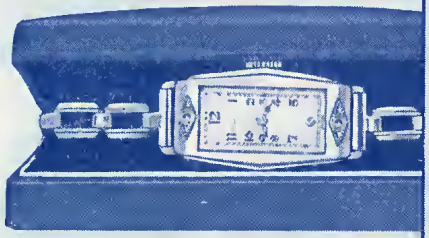

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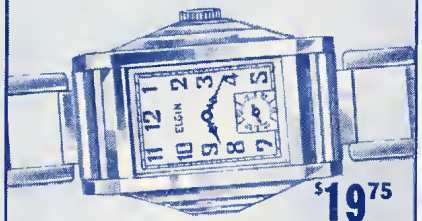

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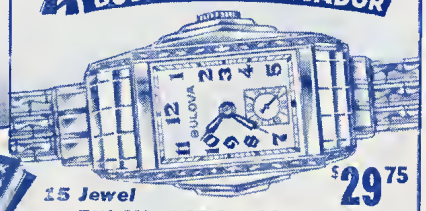

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